

Rip It Up and Start Again

SIMON REYNOLDS

POSTPUNK 1978-1984





PENGUIN BOOKS

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Simon Reynolds, a London-born music journalist living in New York, is the author of *Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture*, which was shortlisted for the 1999 Ralph J. Gleason Music Book Awards. His other books include *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock* and *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (the latter coauthored with Joy Press). His pop-culture articles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Village Voice*, *Blender*, *The Wire*, *Uncut*, and many others, and his essays have appeared in over twenty anthologies. A former senior editor for *Spin*, he remains a senior contributing writer for the magazine.

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TO MY BROTHER TIM, WHO TURNED ME ON TO PUNK IN THE
FIRST PLACE,
MY SON KIERAN, AND IN MEMORY OF REBECCA PRESS AND
BURHAN TUFAIL

CONTENTS

Introduction

Prologue: The Unfinished Revolution

PART 1: POSTPUNK

1. Public Image Belongs to Me: John Lydon and PiL

2. Autonomy in the U.K.: DIY and the British Independent-Label Movement

3. Tribal Revival: The Pop Group and the Slits

4. Militant Entertainment: Gang of Four, the Mekons, and the Leeds Scene

5. Uncontrollable Urge: The Industrial Grotesquerie of Pere Ubu and Devo

6. Living for the Future: Cabaret Voltaire, the Human League, and the Sheffield Scene

7. Just Step Sideways: The Fall, Joy Division, and the Manchester Scene

8. Industrial Devolution: Throbbing Gristle's Music from the Death Factory

9. Contort Yourself: No Wave New York

10. Art Attack: Talking Heads, Wire, and Mission of Burma

11. Messthetics: The London Vanguard

12. *Freak Scene:*
Cabaret Noir and Theater of Cruelty in Postpunk San Francisco

13. *Careering:*
PiL and Postpunk's Peak and Fall

PART 2: NEW POP AND NEW ROCK

14. *Ghost Dance:*
2-Tone and the Ska Resurrection

15. *Sex Gang Children:*
Malcolm McLaren, the Pied Piper of Pantomime Pop

16. *Mutant Disco and Punk Funk:*
Crosstown Traffic in Early Eighties New York (and Beyond)

17. *Fun 'n' Frenzy:*
Postcard Records and the Sound of Young Scotland

18. *Electric Dreams: Synthpop*

19. *Play to Win:*
The Pioneers of New Pop

20. *New Gold Dreams 81-82-83-84:*
New Pop's Peak, the Second British Invasion of America, and the Rise of MTV

21. *Dark Things and Glory Boys:*
The Return of Rock with Goth and the New Psychedelia

22. *Raiding the Twentieth Century:*
ZTT, the Art of Noise, and Frankie Goes to Hollywood

Afterword

Acknowledgments

Index

For Discography and Discography Part 2: Postpunk Esoterica (the latter featuring extensive commentary) go to the *Rip It Up and Start Again* Web site at www.simonreynolds.net, which also contains footnotes, source notes, transcripts, interviews with the author, links, and other postpunk-related material.

INTRODUCTION

PUNK BYPASSED ME almost completely at first. Thirteen going on fourteen at the time, and growing up in an English commuter town, I only have the faintest memories of 1977. I vaguely recall photo spreads of spiky-haired punks in a Sunday newspaper magazine, but that's it really. The Sex Pistols swearing on television, "God Save the Queen" versus the Royal Jubilee, an entire culture convulsed and quaking—I simply *did not notice*. As for what I was into and up to *instead*, well, it's a bit of a haze. Nineteen seventy-seven, was that the year I wanted to be a cartoonist? Or, having moved onto science fiction, did I spend 1977 systematically working my way through the local library's cache of Ballard, Pohl, Dick? All I know for sure is that pop music barely impinged on my consciousness.

My younger brother Tim got into punk first. There was always this god-awful racket coming through the bedroom wall. One of the many times I went in there to complain, I must have lingered. The profanity hooked me first (I was fourteen), Johnny Rotten's "fuck this and fuck that/Fuck it all and fuck her fucking brat." More than the naughty words themselves, it was the vehemence and virulence of Rotten's delivery—those percussive "fucks," the demonic glee of the rolled *rs* in "brrrrrrrat." There have been a thousand carefully reasoned theses validating the movement's sociocultural import, but if anyone's really honest, the sheer monstrous *evil* of punk was a huge part of its appeal. Take the sickness of Devo, for example. I'd never heard anything so creepy and debased as their early single "Jocko Homo" and its flip side, "Mongoloid," brought around our house by a far more advanced friend.

When I got into the Pistols and the rest, at some point in the middle of 1978, I had no idea that this was all officially "dead." The Pistols were long split. Rotten had already formed Public Image Ltd. Because I'd been otherwise occupied and missed the entire birth, life, and death of punk, I also cannily skipped the mourning after, that sickening '78 crash experienced by almost everybody who was "there" and aware during the exhilarating '77 rush. My belated discovery of punk coincided with the period when things began to pick up again, with what soon became known as postpunk, the subject of this book. So I was listening to X-Ray Spex's *Germfree Adolescents*, but also the first PiL album, Talking Heads' *Fear of Music*, and *Cut* by the Slits. It was all one bright, bursting surge of excitement.

Music historians exalt being in the right place at the right time, those critical moments and locations where revolutions and movements are spawned. This is tough on those of us stuck in suburbia or the provinces. This book is for, and about, the people who

weren't there at the right time and place (in punk's case, London and New York circa 1976), but who nonetheless refused to believe it was all over and done with before they joined in.

Young people have a biological right to be excited about the times they're living through. If you are very lucky, that hormonal urgency is matched by the insurgency of the era, and your built-in adolescent need for amazement and belief coincides with a period of objective abundance. The prime years of postpunk—the half decade from 1978–82—were like that: a *fortune*. I've come pretty close since, but I've never been quite as exhilarated as I was back then. Certainly, I've never been so utterly focused on the present. What's weird, as I recall it now, is that I never bought old records during that period. Why would I have? There were so many new records to buy that there was simply no earthly reason to investigate the past. I had cassettes of Beatles and Stones best-ofs taped off friends, a copy of the Doors' anthology *Weird Scenes Inside the Goldmine*, and that was it. This was partly because the reissue culture that inundates us today didn't exist then; record companies actually *deleted* albums in those days, so huge swathes of the recent past were virtually inaccessible. But mainly it was because there was no time to look back wistfully to something you'd never lived through. There was too much happening *now*.

In retrospect, as a distinct pop-cultural epoch, 1978–82 rivals that fabled stretch between 1963 and 1967 commonly known as the sixties. The postpunk era makes a fair match for the sixties in terms of the sheer amount of great music created, the spirit of adventure and idealism that infused it, and the way that the music seemed inextricably connected to the political and social turbulence of its era. There was a similar blend of anticipation and anxiety, a mania for all things new and futuristic coupled with fear of what the future had in store.

Not that I'm especially patriotic or anything, but it's also striking how both the sixties and the postpunk movement were periods during which Britannia ruled the pop waves. Which is why this book primarily focuses on the U.K. Of course it also deals with American cities where punk happened in any major way: the bohemian capitals of New York and San Francisco, Ohio's postindustrial dreadzones Cleveland and Akron, college towns such as Boston, Massachusetts, and Athens, Georgia. However, in America, punk and postpunk were much more underground, minority cultures than in the U.K., where one could hear the Fall and Joy Division on national radio, and groups as extreme as PiL actually had Top 20 hits and, via the weekly TV show *Top of the Pops*, were beamed into ten million households. Regretfully, for reasons of space and sanity I decided not to grapple with European or Australian postpunk, except for certain key groups—

such as D.A.F. and the Birthday Party—that significantly impacted Anglo-American rock culture.

I have both personal and “objective” reasons for writing this book. Foremost among the objective reasons is that postpunk is a period that has been severely neglected by historians. There are scores of books on punk rock and the events of 1975–77, but virtually nothing on what happened next. Conventional histories of punk end more or less with its “death” in 1978, when the Sex Pistols self-destructed. In the more extreme and sloppy accounts (TV histories of rock are particularly culpable), it’s often implied that nothing of real consequence happened between punk rock and grunge, between *Never Mind the Bollocks* and *Nevermind*. Even after the boom in eighties nostalgia, that decade still tends to be regarded as a musical wasteland redeemed only by mavericks such as Prince and the Pet Shop Boys, or by worthies such as R.E.M. and Springsteen. The early eighties, especially, is still considered a campy comedy zone, an era characterized by pretentious stabs at video-as-art-form and by English eyeliner-and-synth fops with silly haircuts. Fragments of the postpunk story have emerged here and there. But nobody has attempted to capture postpunk as what it was, a counterculture that, while fragmented, shared a common belief that music could change the world.

Being as impartial and detached here as possible, it seems to me that the long “aftermath” of punk running from 1978–84 was way more musically interesting than what happened in 1976 and 1977, when punk staged its back-to-basics rock ‘n’ roll revival. Even in terms of its broader cultural influence, it is arguable that punk had its most provocative repercussions long after its supposed demise. Part of this book’s argument is that revolutionary movements in pop culture actually have their widest impact after the “moment” has allegedly passed and the ideas spread from the metropolitan bohemian elites and hipster cliques that originally “owned” them into the suburbs and outer regions.

Another objective reason for this book is that there has been a huge resurgence of interest in the period, with compilations and reissues of archival postpunk, and a crop of new bands who’ve modeled themselves on postpunk subgenres like No Wave, punk funk, mutant disco, and industrial. A young generation of musicians and listeners has finally come of age without any memory of this era. Some current twentysomethings weren’t even born by this book’s cut-off date, 1984, and as a result find the period massively intriguing. Indeed, because it’s been neglected for so long, postpunk offers a rich seam for the thriving retro industry.

I said there were subjective reasons for my writing this book as

well. Subjective Reason Number One is my memory of this period as superabundant, a golden age of newness and nowness that created a sensation of moving at high speed into the future. Subjective Reason Number Two relates more to the present. When rock critics reach a certain age they often start to wonder if all the mental and emotional energy they've invested in this music thing was actually such a shrewd move. Not exactly a crisis of confidence, but a creasing of certainty. In my case, this prompted me to wonder when exactly it was that I made the decision to embark upon a life of taking music seriously. What made me believe music could matter this much? It was of course that I grew up in the postpunk era. That near simultaneous double whammy of the Pistols' *Bollocks* and PiL's *Metal Box* set me on my present course. It was also the writing in the music press about these records, and records like them, that formed me, writing that week by thrilling week explored and tested just how seriously one could take music (a conversation that continues to this day in different forms and other places). So this book is in part a reckoning with my younger self. And the conclusion I reached? You'll just have to read on.

Rip It Up and Start Again

PROLOGUE

“THE SEX PISTOLS SANG ‘NO FUTURE,’ BUT THERE IS A FUTURE, AND WE’RE TRYING TO BUILD ONE.” —ALLEN RAVENSTINE, *PERE UBU*, 1978

BY THE SUMMER OF 1977, punk had become a parody of itself. Many of the movement’s original participants felt that something open-ended and full of possibilities had degenerated into a commercial formula. Worse, it had proved a rejuvenating shot in the arm to the established record industry that punks had hoped to overthrow.

It was at this point that the fragile unity that punk had forged between working-class kids and arty middle-class bohemians began to fracture. On one side were the populist “real punks” (later to evolve into the Oi! and hardcore movements) who believed that the music needed to stay accessible and unpretentious, to continue to fill its role as the angry voice of the streets. On the other side was the vanguard that came to be known as postpunk, who saw 1977 not as a return to raw rock ’n’ roll but as a chance to make a break with tradition.

The postpunk vanguard—bands such as PiL, Joy Division, Talking Heads, Throbbing Gristle, Contortions, and Scritti Politti—defined punk as an imperative to constant change. They dedicated themselves to fulfilling punk’s uncompleted musical revolution, exploring new possibilities by embracing electronics, noise, jazz and the classical avant-garde, and the production techniques of dub reggae and disco.

Some accused these experimentalists of merely lapsing back into the art rock elitism that punk originally aimed to destroy. Certainly, it’s true that a high proportion of postpunk musicians had art school backgrounds. The No Wave scene in New York, for instance, was virtually wall-to-wall painters, filmmakers, poets, and performance artists. Gang of Four, Cabaret Voltaire, Wire, and the Raincoats are just a handful of the U.K. bands that were started by fine-art or design graduates. Especially in Britain, art schools have long functioned as a state-subsidized bohemia, where working-class youths too unruly for a life of labor mingle with slumming bourgeois kids too wayward for a middle-management career. After graduation, many turn to pop music as a way to sustain the experimental lifestyle they’d enjoyed at art college while maybe, just maybe, making a living.

Of course, not everyone in postpunk attended art school, or even college. Self-educated in a scattered, omnivorous fashion, figures like John Lydon or Mark E. Smith of the Fall fit the syndrome of the anti-intellectual intellectual, ravenously well read but scornful of academia and suspicious of art in its institutionalized forms. But really, what

could be more arty than wanting to destroy art, to smash the boundaries that keep it sealed off from everyday life?

Those postpunk years from 1978 to 1984 saw the systematic ransacking of twentieth-century modernist art and literature. The entire postpunk period looks like an attempt to replay virtually every major modernist theme and technique via the medium of pop music. Cabaret Voltaire borrowed their name from Dada. Pere Ubu took theirs from Alfred Jarry. Talking Heads turned a Hugo Ball sound poem into a tribal-disco dance track. Gang of Four, inspired by Brecht and Godard's alienation effects, tried to deconstruct rock even as they rocked hard. Lyricists absorbed the radical science fiction of William S. Burroughs, J. G. Ballard, and Philip K. Dick, and techniques of collage and cut-up were transplanted into the music. Duchamp, mediated by 1960s Fluxus, was the patron saint of No Wave. The record cover artwork of the period matched the neomodernist aspirations of the words and music, with graphic designers like Malcolm Garrett and Peter Saville and labels like Factory and Fast Product drawing from constructivism, De Stijl, Bauhaus, John Heartfield, and Die Neue Typographie. This frenzied looting of the archives of modernism culminated with the founding of renegade pop label ZTT—short for Zang Tuum Tumb, a snatch of Italian futurist prose-poetry—and their conceptual group the Art of Noise, named in homage to Luigi Russolo's manifesto for a futurist music.

Taking the word “modernist” in a less specific sense, the postpunk bands were firmly committed to the idea of making modern music. They were totally confident that there were still places to go with rock, a whole new future to invent. For the postpunk vanguard, punk had failed because it attempted to overthrow rock's status quo using conventional music (fifties rock 'n' roll, garage punk, mod) that actually *predated* dinosaur megabands like Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. The postpunks set forth with the belief that “radical content demands radical form.”

One curious by-product of this conviction that rock 'n' roll had outlived its usefulness was the mountainous abuse heaped on Chuck Berry. A key source for punk rock via the guitar playing of Johnny Thunders and Steve Jones, Berry became a negative touchstone, endlessly name-checked as a must to avoid. Perhaps the first example of Berry-phobia occurs as early as the Sex Pistols demos exhumed on *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*. The band begins jamming on “Johnny B. Goode.” Johnny Rotten—the group's closet aesthete, who'd go on to form the archetypal postpunk outfit Public Image Ltd—halfheartedly jabbers the tune and then groans, “Oh fuck, it's *awful*. Stop it, I fucking hate it. *Aaarrrrgh*.” Rotten's howl of disgusted exhaustion—he sounds like he's choking, suffocated by the staleness of the sound—

was echoed by scores of postpunk groups. Cabaret Voltaire, for instance, complained that “rock ‘n’ roll is not about regurgitating Chuck Berry riffs.”

Rather than rama-lama riffing or bluesy chords, the postpunk pantheon of guitar innovators favored angularity, a clean and brittle spikiness. They shunned solos, apart from brief bursts of lead integrated with more rhythm-oriented playing. Instead of a “fat” sound, players like Talking Heads’ David Byrne, the Fall’s Martin Bramah, and the Slits’ Viv Albertine preferred a “skinny” rhythm guitar style often inspired by reggae or funk. This more compact, scrawny style of guitar playing didn’t fill up every corner of the soundscape, and this allowed the bass to step forward from its usually inconspicuous, supportive role to become the lead instrumental voice, fulfilling a melodic function even as it pushed the groove. In this respect, postpunk bassists were playing catch-up with the innovations of Sly Stone and James Brown, and learning from contemporary roots reggae and dub. Pursuing a militant and aggressively monolithic sound, punk had mostly purged “blackness” from rock, severing the music’s links to R&B while simultaneously rejecting disco as escapist and vapid. By 1978, though, the concept of a dangerous dance music began to circulate in postpunk circles, expressed in terms like “perverted disco” and “avant-funk.”

Along with dance music’s sensuality and swing, punk had also rejected all those compound genres (jazz rock, country rock, folk rock, classical rock, etc.) that proliferated in the early seventies. To punks, this sort of thing smacked of virtuoso showing off, meandering jam sessions, and pious hippie platitudes like “it’s all music, man.” Defining itself against this limp, all-gates-open eclecticism, punk proposed a strident purism. In the late seventies, while “fusion” remained a discredited notion, postpunk ushered in a new phase of looking outside rock’s narrow parameters, to black America and Jamaica, obviously, but also to Africa and other zones of what would later be called world music.

Postpunk also rebuilt bridges with rock’s own past, vast swathes of which had been placed off-limits when punk declared 1976 to be Year Zero. Punk installed a myth that still persists to this day in some quarters, that the prepunk early seventies were a musical wasteland. In actuality, that period was one of the richest and most diverse in rock history. The postpunk groups, tentatively at first (after all, no one wanted to be accused of being a hippie or a progressive rocker in disguise), rediscovered those riches, drawing inspiration from the arty end of glam rock that included David Bowie and Roxy Music, from out-rock eccentrics such as Captain Beefheart, and in some cases the more acute end of prog such as Soft Machine, King Crimson, and even

Frank Zappa. In a sense, postpunk was progressive rock, but drastically streamlined and reinvigorated, and with a more austere sensibility (no ostentatious virtuosity), not to mention much better haircuts.

The truth is that some of the defining postpunk groups—Devo, Throbbing Gristle, Cabaret Voltaire, This Heat—were actually prepunk entities that existed in some form or another for several years before the Ramones' 1976 debut album. When punk arrived, it threw the record industry into confusion, making the major labels vulnerable to suggestion and fluxing up all the aesthetic rules so that anything abnormal or extreme suddenly had a chance. Through this breach in the wall of business as usual all sorts of obscure freaks broke through and grabbed at opportunities for a bigger audience.

But it was a particular kind of "art rock" that postpunk pledged allegiance to, not prog's attempt to merge amplified electric guitars with nineteenth-century classical instrumentation and extended compositions, but the minimal-is-maximal lineage that runs from the Velvet Underground through Krautrock and the more intellectual Bowie/Roxy end of glam. For a certain breed of hipster, the music that sustained them through the "wasteland" of the seventies was made by a cluster of kindred spirits—Lou Reed, John Cale, Nico, Iggy Pop, David Bowie, Brian Eno—who were united by their descent from or debt to the Velvet Underground, and who collaborated with one another throughout this period in various combinations.

David Bowie in particular had associations with almost all of these people at various points, through either producing their records or otherwise collaborating. He was the connector, rock's greatest dilettante, forever chasing the next edge, always moving on. More than anyone else, it was Bowie who was the touchstone inspiration for postpunk's ethos of perpetual change. Nineteen seventy-seven might have been the year of the Clash's debut and the Pistols' *Never Mind the Bollocks*, but the truth is that postpunk music was far more deeply affected by four Bowie-related albums released that year, his own *Low* and *Heroes*, and Iggy Pop's *The Idiot* and *Lust for Life*, both of which Bowie produced. Recorded in West Berlin, this astonishing series of LPs hugely impacted listeners who already suspected that punk rock was turning out to be just more of the same old same old. The Bowie and Iggy albums signaled a shift away from America and rock 'n' roll toward Europe and a cool, controlled sound modeled on the Teutonic "motorik" rhythms of Kraftwerk and Neu!—a sound in which synthesizers played as much of a role as guitars. In interviews, Bowie talked of his move to Berlin as an attempt to extricate himself from America, both musically (in terms of the soul and funk that informed *Young Americans*) and spiritually (an escape from the rock 'n' roll

decadence of Los Angeles). Informed by this willed feat of dislocation and self-alienation, *Low* lived up to the album's original working title, *New Music Night and Day*, particularly on its astonishing second side, a suite of twilight-gloomy instrumental atmospheres and yearning wordless plainsong. *Low*, said Bowie, was a response to "seeing the East Bloc, how Berlin survives in the midst of it, which was something that I couldn't express in words. Rather it required *textures*." Which is why he leaned on Brian Eno, the supreme texturologist, as his mentor and right-hand man during the making of *Low* and *Heroes*. Already influential because of his synth noise in Roxy Music and his proto-New Wave solo albums, Eno, after Bowie's Berlin albums, became one of the defining producers of the era, documenting the New York No Wave scene and working with Devo, Talking Heads, and U2. "Some bands went to art school," quipped U2 singer Bono. "We went to Brian Eno."

Bowie and Eno's new Europeanism chimed with the postpunk feeling that America—or at least *white* America—was politically and musically reactionary. When it came to contemporary inspiration, postpunk looked to places other than the rock 'n' roll heartland, among them urban black America, Jamaica, and Europe. For many of the postpunk persuasion, 1977's most significant singles weren't "White Riot" or "God Save the Queen," but "Trans-Europe Express," a metronomic, metal-on-metal threnody for the industrial era by the German band Kraftwerk, and Donna Summer's Eurodisco smash "I Feel Love," made almost entirely from synthetic sounds by producer Giorgio Moroder, an Italian based in Munich. Moroder's electronic disco and Kraftwerk's serene synthpop conjured glistening visions of the Neu Europa—modern, forward-looking, and pristinely postrock in the sense of having virtually no debts to American music.

Along with radicalizing rock form with doses of black rhythm and European electronics, postpunk artists were equally committed to radicalizing the content of the musical equation. Punk's approach to politics—raw rage or agitprop protest—seemed too blunt or too preachy to the postpunk vanguard, and they tried to develop more sophisticated and oblique techniques. Gang of Four and Scritti Politti abandoned tell-it-like-it-is denunciation for lyrics that exposed and dramatized the mechanisms of power in everyday life. "Question everything" was the catchphrase of the day. These bands demonstrated that "the personal is political" by dissecting consumerism, sexual relationships, commonsense notions of what's natural or obvious, and the ways in which what feel like spontaneous, innermost feelings are actually scripted by larger forces. At the same time, the most acute of these groups captured the way that the political is personal, illustrating the processes by which current events

and the actions of government invade everyday life and haunt each individual's private dreams and nightmares.

When it came to politics in the commonly understood sense—the world of demonstrations, grassroots activism, and organized struggle—postpunk bands were more ambivalent. As bohemian nonconformists, they were usually made uncomfortable by calls to solidarity or toeing the party line. They saw the plainspoken demagoguery of overtly politicized musicians of the era (such as Crass and Tom Robinson) as far too literal and unaesthetic, and found their soapbox sermonizing both condescending to the listener and, most of the time, a pointless exercise in “preaching to the converted.” So while many British postpunk groups participated in the Rock Against Racism tours and festivals of the era, they remained wary of RAR and its sister organization, the Anti Nazi League, suspecting them of being fronts for the militant left-wing Socialist Workers Party, who valued music purely as an instrument for radicalizing and mobilizing youth. At the same time, postpunk inherited punk's dreams of resuscitating rock music as a force to change, if not the world, then the consciousness of individual listeners. But rather than the music serving as a mere neutral platform for agitprop, this radicalism was manifested equally in both words and sound. Furthermore, the subversive potential of the lyrics resided as much in their formal *aesthetic* properties (how innovative they were on the level of language or narrative) as in the message or critique they delivered.

Postpunk was a period of astonishing experimentation with lyrics and singing. The Fall's Mark E. Smith invented a kind of Northern English magic realism that mixed industrial grime with the unearthly and uncanny, voiced through a unique, one-note delivery somewhere between amphetamine-spiked rant and alcohol-addled yarn. David Byrne's flustered, neurotic mannerisms perfectly suited his wry, dry examination of nonrock subjects like animals, bureaucracy, “buildings and food.” The Pop Group's Mark Stewart yowled imagistic incantations like a cross between Artaud and James Brown. This was also a fertile period for idiosyncratic female expression, the hitherto unheard perspectives and dissonant tones of the Slits, Lydia Lunch, Ludus, and the Raincoats. Other singer-lyricists—Joy Division's Ian Curtis, Paul Haig of Josef K—were steeped in the shadowy unease and crippling anxiety of Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Conrad, and Beckett. Three-minute mininovels, their songs grappled with classic existentialist quandaries: the struggle and agony of having a “self”; love versus isolation; the absurdity of existence; the human capacity for perversity and spite; the perennial “suicide, why the hell *not*?”

Grappling with these timeless aspects of the human condition, postpunk also tapped into the political zeitgeist. Especially in the

three years from 1978–80, the dislocations caused by economic change and geopolitical upheaval generated a tremendous sense of dread and tension. Britain saw a resurgence of far-Right and neofascist parties, both in electoral politics and in the bloody form of street violence. The cold war reached a renewed pitch of frigidity. Britain's leading music magazine, *New Musical Express*, ran a regular column called "Plutonium Blondes" about the deployment of American cruise missiles in Britain. Singles like Kate Bush's "Breathing" and UB40's "The Earth Dies Screaming" brought nuclear anxiety into the Top 20, and countless postpunks, from This Heat on their concept album *Deceit* to Young Marble Giants with their classic single "Final Day," sang about Armageddon as a real prospect, impending and imminent.

Part of the poignancy of this period of dissident music is its increasingly out-of-sync relationship with the broader culture, which was veering toward the Right. The postpunk period began with the paralysis of an embattled and thwarted Left-liberal politics under the center-left governments of Labour prime minister Jim Callaghan and Democratic president Jimmy Carter. Callaghan and Carter were then almost simultaneously displaced by Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, populist (and popular) right-wing leaders who enforced monetarist economic policies that resulted in mass unemployment and widening social divisions.

Ushering in a long period of conservative politics that lasted twelve years in the United States and sixteen years in Britain, Thatcher and Reagan represented a massive backlash against both the countercultural sixties and the permissive seventies. In response, postpunk tried to build an alternative culture with its own independent infrastructure of labels, distribution, and record stores. The need for "complete control" (which the Clash could only sing about bitterly in the song of that name, having ceded it to CBS) led to the birth of pioneering independent labels such as Rough Trade, Mute, Factory, Subterranean, and SST. This do-it-yourself concept proliferated like a virus, spawning a pandemic of samizdat culture, with bands releasing their own records, local promoters organizing gigs, musicians' collectives creating spaces for bands to play, and small magazines and fanzines taking on the role of an alternative media. Independent labels represented a sort of anticorporate microcapitalism based less on left-wing ideology than the conviction that the major labels were too sluggish, unimaginative, and commerce minded to nurture the most crucial music of the day.

Postpunk was concerned as much with the politics of music itself as with anything in the "real world." It aimed to sabotage rock's dream factory, a leisure industry that channeled youth's energy and idealism into a cultural cul-de-sac while generating huge amounts of

revenue for corporate capitalism. Coined by the Liverpool group Wah! Heat, the term “rockism” spread as a shorthand for a whole set of stale routines that restricted creativity and suppressed surprise. The established ways of doing things that postpunkers refused to perpetuate ranged from conventions of production (like the use of reverb to give records a live, big-room sound) to the predictable rituals of touring and performing (some postpunk bands refused to do encores, while others experimented with multimedia and performance art). Aiming to break the trance of rock-business-as-normal and jolt the listener into awareness, postpunk teemed with metamusic critiques and mini-manifestos, songs such as the Television Personalities’ “Part Time Punks” and Subway Sect’s “A Different Story” that addressed punk’s failure or speculated about the future. Some of this acute self-consciousness came from the radically self-critical sensibility that surrounded 1970s conceptual art, in which the discourse around the work was as important as the art objects themselves.

The metamusical nature of much postpunk helps to explain the extraordinary power of the rock press during this period, with some critics actually playing a part in shaping and directing the culture. This expanded role for the music papers began with punk. Because radio and TV largely spurned punk, because the mainstream print media was generally hostile, and because for a while it was hard for punk bands to even get gigs, the U.K. weekly music papers—*New Musical Express (NME)*, *Sounds*, *Melody Maker*, and *Record Mirror*—took on a huge importance. From 1978 to 1981, the market leader *NME* had a circulation hovering between 200,000 and 270,000, and an actual readership three or four times that size. Punk mobilized a huge audience that was looking for the way forward and ready to be guided. The music press had virtually no rivals for this function. Monthly general-interest magazines such as *Q* or style magazines such as *The Face* didn’t exist yet, and pop coverage in the quality newspapers was meager.

As a result, the music press had enormous influence, and individual writers—the driven ones, those with a messianic complex—enjoyed prestige and power barely imaginable today. By identifying (and exaggerating) the connections between groups and articulating the unwritten manifestos of these fledgling movements and city-based scenes, the critics could actually intensify and accelerate the development of postpunk music. In *Sounds*, from late 1977 onward, Jon Savage championed “New Musick,” the industrial/dystopian science fiction side of postpunk. Paul Morley at *NME* progressed from mythologizing Manchester and Joy Division to dreaming up the concept of New Pop before going on to help invent the groups Frankie

Goes to Hollywood and the Art of Noise. *Sounds's* Garry Bushell was the demagogue/ideologue of Oi! This combination of activist critics and musicians whose work was a form of "active criticism" fueled a syndrome of runaway evolution. Trend competed with trend, and each new development was swiftly followed by a backlash or a swerve. All of this contributed to the surging-into-the-future feeling of the period, while simultaneously accelerating the disintegration of punk's unity into squabbling postpunk factions.

Musicians and journalists fraternized a lot during this period, a kinship related perhaps to a sense of solidarity as comrades in the culture war of postpunk versus Old Wave as well as in the era's political struggles. Roles shifted around. Some journalists played in bands or made records, and there were musicians who wrote criticism, such as Pere Ubu's David Thomas (under the pen name Crocus Behemoth), Joy Division's Steven Morris, and Manicured Noise's Steve Walsh. Because so many people involved in postpunk were nonmusicians initially or came from other artistic fields, the gap between those who "did" and those who commented wasn't nearly as wide as in the prepunk era. Throbbing Gristle's Genesis P-Orridge, for instance, described himself as a writer and thinker first and foremost and not really a musician at all. He even used the word "journalist" as a *positive* descriptive term for TG's documentarian approach to harsh postindustrial realities.

Changes in the style and methods of rock writing heightened the postpunk sensation of hurtling into a bold new era. Music journalists in the early seventies typically blended traditional critical qualities (objectivity, solid reporting, authoritative knowledge) with a New Journalism-influenced rock 'n' roll looseness and informality. This jammed-out, chatty style—juiced with "ain't"s, hep slang, and sly, winking references to drugs and chicks—didn't suit postpunk. The intellectual underpinnings of this older rock criticism—notions of male misbehavior as rebellion, madness as genius, the cult of street credibility and authenticity—were some of the very things being scrutinized and challenged by the antirockist vanguard. A new generation of music journalists took over whose writing seemed to be made of the same *stuff* as the music they championed. The stark urgency and clean lines of their prose mirrored the light-metal severity of groups like Wire, the Banshees, and Gang of Four, just as the record design aesthetic of the time emphasized a bold, bracing geometry of hard angles and primary-color blocks. The new school of music writing merged puritanism and playfulness in a way that simultaneously undercut the casual tone of the old rock journalism while puncturing its stodgy core of certainty, all those hidden assumptions and taken-for-granted notions about what rock was all

about.

What bands and journalists actually talked *about* also contributed to the sense of entering a new era. An interview with a rock band today tends to become a laundry list of musical influences and reference points, such that the story of a band's life typically gets reduced to a journey through taste. This sort of "record collection rock" didn't exist in the postpunk era. Bands referred to their musical inspirations, of course, but they had so many other things—politics, cinema, art, books—on their minds, too. Some of the politically committed bands actually felt that it was self-indulgent or trivial to talk about music per se. They felt duty-bound to discuss serious issues, which nowadays sounds somewhat puritanical, but at the time reinforced the sense that pop wasn't a segmented category insulated from the rest of reality. This lack of interest in discussing musical influences also created a sense of postpunk as an absolute break with tradition. It felt like the culture's eyes and ears were trained on the future, not the past, with bands engaged in a furious competition to reach the eighties a few years ahead of schedule.

On a mission and fully in the now, postpunk created a thrilling sense of urgency. The new records came thick and fast, classic after classic. Even the incomplete experiments and interesting failures carried a powerful utopian charge and contributed to an exhilarating collective conversation. Certain groups existed more on the level of an idea than a fully realized proposition, but nonetheless made a difference just by existing and talking a good game in the press.

Many groups born in the postpunk period went on to enjoy huge mainstream fame, including New Order, Depeche Mode, the Human League, U2, Talking Heads, Scritti Politti, and Simple Minds. Others who were minor or background figures at the time went on to achieve later success in a different guise, such as Bjork, the KLF, Beastie Boys, Jane's Addiction, and Sonic Youth. But the history of postpunk is definitely not written by the victors. There are dozens of bands who made landmark albums but never achieved more than an abiding cult status, earning the dubious consolation prize of being an influence and reference point for '90s alt-rock megabands (Gang of Four begot Red Hot Chili Peppers, Throbbing Gristle sired Nine Inch Nails, Talking Heads even supplied Radiohead with their name). Hundreds more made just one or two amazing singles, then disappeared with barely a trace.

Beyond the musicians, there was a whole cadre of catalysts and culture warriors, enablers and ideologues who started labels, managed bands, became innovative producers, published fanzines, ran hipster record stores, promoted gigs, and organized festivals. True, the prosaic work of creating and maintaining an alternative culture lacks the

glamour of punk's public gestures of outrage and cultural terrorism. Destroying is always more dramatic than building. But postpunk was constructive and forward looking. The very prefix "post-" implied faith in a future that punk had said didn't exist.

Punk's simple stance of negation, of being *against*, briefly created unity. But as soon as the question shifted to "What are we actually *for*?" the movement disintegrated and dispersed. Each strand nurtured its own creation myth of what punk meant and pursued its own vision of the way forward. Yet underneath the fractious diaspora of the postpunk years there still remained a common inheritance from the punk moment, namely, a revived belief in the power of the music, along with the feeling of responsibility that came with this conviction, which in turn made the question "Where to now?" *worth* fighting over. The by-product of all this division and disagreement was diversity, a fabulous wealth of sounds and ideas that rivals the sixties as a golden age for music.

PART 1

CHAPTER 1

JOHN LYDON AND PiL

“EVER GET THE FEELING *you’ve been cheated?*”

Johnny Rotten’s infamous parting words to the audience at Winterland in San Francisco on January 14, 1978, weren’t a question so much as a confession. Despite being the front man of the most dangerous band in the world, John Lydon was *bored*—sick of the Sex Pistols’ music, tired of his own “Rotten” persona, and disappointed with how punk as a whole had panned out. Winterland was the last date of the Pistols’ turbulent debut tour of America. Within days, the band would disintegrate in acrimonious confusion.

Lydon’s disillusionment had been brewing for months. The first public sign occurred during “The Punk and His Music,” a July 1977 show on London’s Capital Radio station, during which Lydon voiced his frustration with the predictability of most punk bands, saying he felt “cheated” by the genre’s lack of diversity and imagination. Splicing together interview segments with Lydon and records he’d personally selected, “The Punk and His Music” revealed that the singer had far more sophisticated and eclectic taste in music than his, er, public image suggested. Those who tuned in anticipating punk rock were immediately thrown for a loop by the first selection, Tim Buckley’s “Sweet Surrender,” a lush, sensual R&B song swathed with orchestral strings. Over the next ninety minutes Lydon further tweaked expectations, playing languid roots reggae, solo tracks by former Velvet Underground members Lou Reed, John Cale, and Nico, a surprising amount of hippie-tinged music by Can, Captain Beefheart, and Third Ear Band, and two tracks by his hero Peter Hammill, a full-blown progressive rocker. Just about everything Lydon played on Capital Radio contradicted the punk myth of the early seventies as a musical wasteland. If this wasn’t treasonous enough, Lydon broke with his Malcolm McLaren-scripted role as cultural terrorist by effectively outing himself as an aesthete. Along with his hipster music choices, the interview revealed a sensitive, thoughtful individual rather than the monster of newspaper legend.

For Lydon, this image makeover was a matter of survival. A month before his Capital Radio appearance, the Pistols’ anti-Royalist single “God Save the Queen” had been released to coincide with the Jubilee celebrations marking the twenty-fifth year of Elizabeth II’s reign. Defying radio bans and record retail embargoes, “God Save the Queen” became the best-selling single in Britain. Demonized by the tabloids, Johnny Rotten was repeatedly assaulted by enraged patriotic thugs. Scarred, scared, and in practical terms virtually under house arrest, Lydon decided to take control of his destiny. His anarchist/

Antichrist persona—originally Lydon's own creation, but hyped up by manager Malcolm McLaren and distorted by a media eager to believe the worst—had spiraled out of control. Agreeing to do the Capital Radio interview without consulting his management, Lydon embarked on a process of persona demolition that would result in "Public Image" the song and Public Image Ltd the group.

During "The Punk and His Music," Lydon sounded fragile and vulnerable as he discussed the attacks by angry Royalists. "It's very easy for a gang to pick on one person and smash his head in. It's a big laugh for them, and it's very easy for them to say 'what a wanker, look at him run away!' I mean, what's he meant to do?" Positioning himself as victim and revealing his feelings of humiliation, Lydon deliberately rehumanized himself. This naturally incensed McLaren, who accused Lydon of dissipating "the band's threat" by revealing himself as a "man of taste." McLaren saw the Pistols as antimusic, but here was Lydon waxing lyrical about his esoteric record collection and gushing, "I just like *all* music...I love my music," like a fucking hippie! From that point onward, McLaren decided that Rotten was at heart "a constructive sissy rather than a destructive lunatic," and focused his energy on molding the more suggestible Sid Vicious into the Pistols' true star, a cartoon psychopath, wanton and self-destructive.

In the latter months of 1977, a chasm grew between Lydon and the other Sex Pistols that mirrored the polarization of punk as a whole into arty bohemians versus working-class street toughs. Lydon came from an impeccably deprived background, but his sensibility was much closer to the art school contingent. He wasn't the unemployed guttersnipe mythologized by the Clash, but earned decent money alongside his construction worker dad at a sewage plant and worked at a playschool during the summer. Although he often professed to hate art and despise intellectuals, he was well read (Oscar Wilde was a favorite) with fierce opinions (Joyce was not). Whereas Steve Jones and Paul Cook left school at age sixteen, Lydon even made a brief foray into higher education, studying English literature and art at Kingsway College. Above all, Lydon was a music connoisseur. He couldn't play an instrument or write melodies, but he had a real sonic sensibility and a much more expansive sense of possibilities than his fellow Pistols.

The reggae and art rock that Lydon played on "The Punk and His Music" sketched out the emotional and musical template for Public Image Ltd. When he talked about identifying with Dr. Alimantado's "Born for a Purpose," a song about being persecuted as a Rasta, Lydon gave his audience an advance glimpse of PiL's aura of paranoia and prophecy, casting himself as a visionary outcast in Babylon, U.K. Musically, what he loved about Captain Beefheart and the dub

producers was their experimental playfulness, the way “they just *love sound*, they like using any sound.” Effectively, “The Punk and His Music” offered a listening list for a postpunk movement yet to be born, hints and clues for where to take the music next.

PUNK SEEMED TO BE “OVER” almost before it really got started. For many early participants, the death knell came on October 28, 1977, with the release of *Never Mind the Bollocks*. Had the revolution come to this, something as prosaic and conventional as an album? *Bollocks* was product, eminently consumable. Rotten’s lyrics and vocals were incendiary, but Steve Jones’s fat guitar sound and Chris Thomas’s superb production—thickly layered, glossy, well organized—added up to a disconcertingly orthodox hard rock that contradicted the group’s reputation for chaos and ineptitude. Lydon later blamed McLaren for steering the rest of the band toward “a regressive mod vibe,” while admitting that his own ideas for how the record should have sounded would have rendered it “unlistenable for most people” because the listeners “wouldn’t have had a point of reference.”

Journalist Jon Savage reviewed *Bollocks* for *Sounds* and today recalls it feeling “like a tombstone, airless, no spaces in the music,” a comment that pinpoints the record’s failure as a deficiency of dub. Compared to the miragelike unreality of reggae production—all glimmering reverb haze, disorienting effects, and flickering ectoplasmic wisps—most punk records sounded retarded, stuck in the monochromatic and mono midsixties, before psychedelia’s expanded palette of timbres and stereophonic sorcery. The sharper bands coming out of punk knew they had serious catching up to do. Some groups, such as the Clash and the Ruts, picked up primarily on the protest aspect of roots reggae—the blunt sloganeering and sermonizing of the Wailers’ “Get Up Stand Up,” the radical chic of Peter Tosh’s Rasta guerrilla persona. At the other extreme, the more adventurous postpunk bands responded to reggae as a purely *sonic* revolution, an Africanized psychedelia, shape shifting and perception altering. During the half decade from 1977 to 1981, reggae’s spatialized production and sophisticated yet elemental rhythms provided *the* template for postpunk bands looking to experiment.

In Jamaica itself, roots militancy and dub ethereality were indivisible. The glue that held them together, Rastafarianism, is a millenarian creed, “part journalism, part prophecy,” in the words of critic James A. Winders. Rasta spirituality was something most white Britons couldn’t buy into easily. This was partly because of its illiberal traits, such as the nasty streak of antifeminism, but mostly because the

absolutism of Rasta's blood-and-fire visions was temperamentally alien to secular British youth, whose idea of religion generally derives from Anglicanism (noncommittal, wishy-washy, as close to being agnostic as one can get without pissing God off). From the ranks of postpunk, perhaps only one person really tapped into a spiritual ferocity to rival Rasta: John Lydon.

Raised in London as the child of Irish Catholic immigrants, Lydon had his own window into the postcolonial dislocation of the former British Empire's neglected subjects. It's no coincidence that his autobiography bears the subtitle *No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs*, the phrase many English landlords put in classified ads or window signs when looking for tenants before the Race Relations Act outlawed such blatant discrimination. Lydon's identification with the black British experience of "sufferation" and "downpression" and his passion for Jamaican riddim and bass pressure suffused his post-Pistols music, desolating PiL's sound with eerie space and heavy dread.

Now an ex-Pistol, Lydon arrived in Britain after the disastrous American tour only to be immediately invited to board another jet plane, this one heading out to Jamaica, by Virgin Records bigwig Richard Branson. Lydon, renowned for his reggae expertise, would accompany Branson as an A&R consultant for Virgin's roots and dub imprint, the Front Line. This "working holiday" would give Lydon time to consider his future. Nice work if you can get it: Lydon spent most of his time lounging poolside at the Kingston Sheraton Hotel, gorging on lobster and hanging with the cream of Jamaican reggae, including several of his heroes, such as Big Youth, U Roy, Burning Spear, and Prince Far I.

Just a few days after the Pistols' breakup, Lydon announced his intention to form a new band that would be "anti music of any kind." On his return from Jamaica, he started recruiting. Lydon invited his friend John Wardle—an East Ender with piercing blue eyes who had reinvented himself as Jah Wobble—to play bass, despite his being barely acquainted with the instrument. Lydon also tracked down Keith Levene, who had played guitar in the earliest incarnation of the Clash.

Reggae was the crucial point of intersection for these three core members of PiL, otherwise a motley crew both musically and personally. "The whole reason PiL worked at all was that John, Wobble, and myself were just total dub fanatics," says Levene. "We were always going to 'blues.'" Blues were illegal reggae dances somewhere between a house party and a sound system (those massively amplified dances featuring DJs and MCs, rather than bands, and held inside halls or outdoors on lawns). Blues generally took place in someone's apartment, with money raised by selling alcohol and sometimes weed. Long a fanatical reggae collector, Lydon had been

introduced to sound system culture by his friend Don Letts, a black DJ who played at legendary punk venue the Roxy and who is often credited with turning the punk audience on to reggae. With Letts as his escort, Lydon frequently found himself the only white person inside ultraheavy clubs like the Four Aces in East London. "You'd feel a bit dodgy sneaking into the blues," says Wobble, "but it was fine on the whole. Black people were just cool about it. It'd be like, 'what's these white kids doing here?' But no one would hassle you. In fact, as a punk rocker you were safer in those days at the black dances than you were going down to the local white-boy pub. For me, hearing the bass that loud was a huge thing. The physical nature of it just left me gobsmacked."

Wobble had grown up in an East London housing project located at the junction of Jamaica Street and Stepney Way, which neatly symbolized the collision of West Indies and East End that would define him. Wobble met Lydon at Kingsway College and the two became part of a misfit crew known as the Four Johns (the others being John Grey and John Ritchie, aka Sid Vicious). In those days, Wobble had a reputation for being something of a thug. "I think we were all emotional cripples back then," he says with a hint of regret. But when he picked up Vicious's bass guitar, something was released in him. "I immediately felt bonded to the instrument. It was very therapeutic, although I didn't understand that at the time." Drawing on his gut understanding of the Jamaican music he adored, and fueled by speed, Wobble taught himself to play reggae bass, in which a simple recurring phrase works simultaneously as a melodic motif and a steady rhythmic pulse. Picking up reggae tricks like using old strings (they have no twang), he learned how to "play soft, not in a percussive way. You caress the string. Pure vibration." Wobble's basslines became the human heartbeat in PiL's music, the roller coaster that simultaneously cocooned you and transported you through the terror ride.

With Wobble's bass supplying the melodic element of any given PiL song, Keith Levene's guitar was freed up to freak out. One of PiL's most curious features is that, for an avowedly antirock band, they had a guitar hero at their core, the Jimi Hendrix of postpunk. Unlike most of his peers, Levene had *serious* chops. Before punk, he'd done what guitarists were supposed to do in the days of prog-rock virtuosity: practice, practice, practice. As a teenager growing up in North London, he'd spend days on end jamming at a friend's house, with sessions lasting as long as eight hours. Even more blasphemous, in punk terms, was the fact that young Keith's favorite guitar hero was Steve Howe of Yes. At age fifteen, Levene even roadied for Yes for a while.

Punks were supposed to purge their collections of King Crimson and Mahavishnu Orchestra albums, or at least hide them in the cupboard. "There's a lot of people in punk who could play guitar much better than they made out," says Levene. "But I never pretended I couldn't play lead." Despite all the prog skeletons in his closet, Levene hurled himself into the early punk fray and became one of the founding members of the Clash. But his harsh, discordant style became increasingly at odds with that group's anthemic rock 'n' roll. Even then he was developing the style that would become his PiL trademark, an improvisatory mode of playing that deliberately incorporated "errors." When Levene hit a wrong note, he'd immediately repeat the mistake to see if the wrongness could become a new kind of rightness. "The idea was to break through conditioning, take yourself out of one channel and into another space." It wasn't "creative differences" that led to his exit from the Clash, though. Levene was expelled because of his negative attitude toward the band, which his colleagues attributed to amphetamine-fueled mood swings.

Levene and Lydon first bonded in a Sheffield pub after a joint Clash/Pistols gig in July 1976. The singer and the guitarist were both sitting apart from their respective groups and looking miserable. Levene approached Lydon and during their conversation suggested that they work together if their bands ever fell apart. Eighteen months later, PiL was shaped by Levene's and Lydon's disgust with their previous bands' relapses into American hard-rock tradition. "To me the Pistols were the *last* rock 'n' roll band, they weren't the beginning of anything," says Levene. "Whereas PiL really felt like the start of something new."

The name Public Image Ltd was ripe with meaning. The phrase first caught Lydon's imagination when he read Muriel Spark's *The Public Image*, a novel about an unbearably egotistical actress. "Limited" initially signified keeping his persona under a tight leash, "not being as 'out there' as I was with the Sex Pistols." Seemingly symbolizing this jettisoning of the swollen alter ego Johnny Rotten, the singer reverted to his real name, John Lydon. In fact, Malcolm McLaren had claimed ownership of "Johnny Rotten" and acquired an injunction against the singer's using the stage name. At the time, almost nobody knew about this legal backstory, though, so the Rotten/Lydon shift seemed like a really powerful statement: the singer symbolically reclaiming his true identity and making a fresh start as part of a collective, Public Image Ltd.

The idea of "Ltd" soon escalated to take on its business meaning, the limited company. PiL, proclaimed Lydon, was not a band in the traditional sense, but a communications company for which making records was just one front of activity. Enthused, Lydon and Levene

talked about diversifying into movie soundtracks, graphics, making “video albums,” even designing music technology. To show they were serious, PiL recruited two nonmusician members. Dave Crowe, an old school friend of Lydon’s, acted as the band’s accountant. Jeannette Lee, a former girlfriend of Don Letts’s and his comanager at the clothing store Acme Attractions, was recruited to be PiL’s video maker. Lee also happened to be going out with Levene. “Jeannette was telling me how she’d had a lot to do with the editing of Don’s punk rock documentary, and the script for his next movie, *Dread at the Controls*, which never got made. I was into the idea of PiL not doing straightforward videos, and she basically talked me into her joining. Wobble was dead against it.”

Part of the impetus behind PiL posing as a corporation was to continue punk’s project of demystifying the record business. While the Clash lamented the industry’s knack for “turning rebellion into money,” PiL reversed that syndrome, suggesting that money making was a potentially subversive strategy of working from within, a stealth campaign that was less spectacular than the Pistols’ revolt but more insidious. It was also more honest and less starry-eyed to present rock bands as the money-making enterprises they really were, as opposed to gangs of guitar-wielding guerrillas. Accordingly, Lydon and his colleagues overhauled their image, purging anything redolent of punk clichés and instead wearing tailored suits. This anti-rock ‘n’ roll image culminated with Dennis Morris’s artwork for PiL’s debut album, fashion-magazine-style portraits of each member of the group, immaculately coutured and coiffed. Lydon appeared on the front under Italian *Vogue* lettering, while the reverse saw Wobble sporting a debonair 1920s lounge lizard mustache.

Stridently opposed to all the standard rock routines and procedures, PiL had no manager and initially vowed that they would never tour. Above all, it was not the Johnny Rotten Band, but a genuine collective. This was a noble idea, but in reality the group’s privileged status—an experimental outfit funded by a major label—depended on Virgin’s belief that Lydon was their hottest property, the most charismatic and significant British front man to emerge since Bowie, and a potential superstar set to dominate the next decade of music. Thanks to the peculiarly indeterminate feel of the music scene in 1978—punk in its death throes, the future wide open—PiL found themselves in an unprecedented position of strength. Virgin was prepared to indulge Lydon’s artistic whims, believing that he would either come up with the goods, or come around eventually and embrace a more accessible sound.

That’s the cynical way of looking at it. In truth, Virgin’s cofounder and main music man, Simon Draper, paid more than lip service to

ideas about experimentation and innovation. During the early seventies, Virgin was one of the key “progressive” labels, home to Henry Cow, Faust, Can, Tangerine Dream, and Robert Wyatt, among others. The label cannily adapted to punk, trimming its roster, shifting focus from albums to singles, and, not least, signing the movement’s most important group, the Sex Pistols. By 1978, Virgin had repositioned itself as the leading major label for “modern music,” with a strong postpunk roster including XTC, Devo, Magazine, and the Human League. “They weren’t such a big label in those days, still living off the luck of Mike Oldfield’s *Tubular Bells*,” recalls Levene. “Branson was like a superhippie, a hippie with no qualms about making money. He didn’t mind trying a few crazy things.” Branson may have been a “superhippie,” but Virgin did subsidize three of the most extreme albums ever released by a major label: *Public Image*, *Metal Box*, and *Flowers of Romance*.

Given Lydon’s initial talk of PiL as antimusic and antime melody, the group’s debut single, “Public Image,” was a massive relief for all concerned—the record company, Pistols fans, and critics. It’s a searing, soaring statement of intent. The glorious, chiming minimalism of Wobble’s bassline and Levene’s plangent, ringing chords mirror Lydon’s quest for purity as he jettisons not just the Rotten alter ego (“somebody had to stop me/...I will not be treated as property”) but rock ‘n’ roll itself. “That song was the first proper bassline I ever came up with,” says Wobble. “Very simple, a beautiful interval from E to B. Just the joy of vibration. And incredible guitar from Keith, this great burst of energy.” “Public Image” is like a blueprint for the reborn, purified rock of the 1980s. One can hear the Edge from U2 in its radiant surge. “It’s so clean, so tingly, like a cold shower,” says Levene. “It could be really thin glass penetrating you but you don’t know until you start bleeding internally.”

Wrapped in a fake newspaper with tabloid headlines, “Public Image” shot to number nine on the U.K. chart in October 1978. While the single was greeted with universal rapture, *Public Image* the album got a more mixed reception. *Sounds* voiced the widespread sense held by punk diehards that Lydon had lost it, abandoning both the opportunities and responsibilities inherent in being *the* punk figurehead and instead wallowing in arty self-indulgence. The album *was* uncompromising, throwing the listener in at the deep end with the nine-minute death wish dirge “Theme,” a near cacophony of suicidal despair and Catholic guilt, with Lydon howling about masturbation as mortal sin. Next up was the anticlerical doggerel of “Religion I”/“Religion II” (a blasphemous ditty written for the Pistols and originally titled “Sod in Heaven”), followed by the hacking thrash funk of “Annalisa,” the true story of a German girl who starved to

death because her parents believed she was possessed by the devil and turned to the church rather than psychiatrists for help. If side one of *Public Image* was loosely themed around religion, the more accessible second side was largely concerned with the tribulations of being the punk messiah. In “Public Image,” Lydon reasserted his rights over “Johnny Rotten”—“Public image belongs to me/It’s my entrance, my own creation, my grand finale”—only to end the song by shedding the persona with an echo chamber yell of “goodbye!” “Low Life” fingered McLaren as the “egomaniac trainer/traitor” who “never did understand,” while the foaming paranoia of “Attack” showed that the mental scars from summer 1977, when Lydon was U.K. Public Enemy Number One, were still livid.

What’s striking in retrospect about PiL’s debut is that, for all the rhetoric about being antirock, a hefty proportion of *Public Image* actually rocks *hard*. Combining raw power and uncanny dubspace, “Low Life” and “Attack” sound like *Never Mind the Bollocks* might have if Lydon’s reggae-and-Krautrock sensibility had prevailed, while “Theme” was nothing if not an orgy of twisted guitar virtuosity, Levene generating an astonishing amount of sound from a single guitar. “In the beginning, it was just my onstage sound, no effects, just wacking things off in one take,” recalls Levene. “No second takes, no overdubs. Sometimes not even knowing what I was going to play, writing the tune on the spot. See, the first album is the one time when we were a *band*. I remember worrying a little at the time, ‘Does this do too much what we publicly say we’re not going to do?’—meaning, *rock out*. But what we were doing really was showing everybody that we were intimately acquainted with what we ultimately intended to break down. And we started that dismantling process with the album’s last track, ‘Fodderstompf.’”

As often happens with bands committed to progression, the most extreme track on the preceding album is the springboard for the next. On one level, “Fodderstompf” was a throwaway, an extended disco spoof, almost a parody of Donna Summer’s “Love to Love You Baby,” with Lydon the antisentimentalist taking the piss out of romance, affection, commitment. “I hate love. There isn’t a love song in us. It’s bullshit,” he told Sex Pistols’ biographers Fred and Judy Vermorel. On “Fodderstompf,” Lydon and Wobble yowl “we only wanted to be loved” into an echo chamber using shrill Monty Python-style housewife voices, ad-lib insults at the studio engineer behind the glass, blast a fire extinguisher at the mike, and generally goof off. “Me and John, I think we’d had a bit of wine or whatever that night,” chuckles Wobble. The track runs for almost eight minutes because its *raison d’être* was to fulfill the minimum album length of thirty minutes stipulated by the band’s contract. In a pointed fuck-you to

Virgin, and arguably to the record buyer too, Wobble at one point warbles, “We are now trying to finish the album with a minimum amount of effort which we are now doing very suc-cess-ful-leeeee.” Says Wobble, “It was this confrontational thing, a real mickey take on the record company.” Yet musically the track is the most compelling thing on the debut. Its hypnotic dub-funk bassline, subliminal synth burbles, and monstrous snare sound (drastically processed and absurdly prominent in the mix) look ahead to 1979’s *Metal Box*, on which the group would fully embrace the studio-as-instrument methodology of disco and dub. “People *loved* that track,” says Wobble. “It’s got quite a sense of anarchy. In its own way, it’s as mental as Funkadelic. And it had the perfect funk bassline.”

Around this time Lydon started telling the press that the only contemporary music he really cared for was disco, a striking rhetorical move given the fact that the standard punk stance was that disco sucked. PiL, he stressed, were a *dance* band. Disco was functional, useful music. It dispensed with all the bollocks, the false hopes, and unwise investments in rock as counterculture that punk had ended up perpetuating. All this was part of Lydon’s continued rhetorical campaign against rock, which, if not dead, to his mind certainly ought to be killed off. PiL were the men for the job. Chiming in with his anticlericalism and his “Anarchy in the U.K.” self-description as Antichrist, Lydon compared rock to “a church, a religion, a farce.”

But the reluctant savior still had to deal with the expectations of his devout congregation of punk believers. Making their U.K. live debut on Christmas Day of 1978, PiL played London’s Rainbow theater, as traditionally rockbiz a venue as could then be imagined. Slightly less conventional was the fact that Wobble played the entire show sitting on a chair (at that point he couldn’t physically play the bass any other way). Lydon sauntered onstage carrying two plastic shopping bags stuffed with lager cans. After a year’s absence from live performance in England, he cheerily greeted the audience, “So what you fuckers been doing since I’ve been away, eh? I hope you ain’t been spending time and money down the King’s Road” (a reference to the London street where Malcolm McLaren and his designer partner Vivienne Westwood’s punk boutique was located). The audience hollered for Pistols tunes, but Lydon was adamant: “If you wanna hear that, fuck off! That’s history.” Although the music was intermittently powerful, PiL’s performance suffered from first-night nerves and equipment problems. Lydon pontificated, upbraided the audience, but ultimately failed to connect. One of the cans he handed out to the audience was hurled back, unopened, glancing off his face and drawing blood. As a result, Lydon and Levene spent portions of the show with their backs turned to the crowd. There was no encore and

the gig ended sourly, energy blocked, like bad sex.

The year 1978 limped to a close for PiL, the group's future unclear. Many wondered whether Lydon had thrown it all away, that awesome power at his disposal, effectively abandoning the audience he'd mobilized and who were now looking for leadership. But 1979 lay wide-open, and Lydon's greatest *musical* triumphs actually lay ahead of him.

CHAPTER 2

DIY AND THE BRITISH INDEPENDENT-LABEL MOVEMENT

THERE ARE PEOPLE who will say in all earnestness that the Buzzcocks EP *Spiral Scratch* was a more epochal punk single than “Anarchy in the U.K.” Released in January 1977 on the Buzzcocks’ own New Hormones label, the EP wasn’t the first independently released record, not by a long stretch, but it was the first to make a real polemical *point* about independence. In the process, *Spiral Scratch* inspired thousands of people to play the do-it-yourself/release-it-yourself game.

Spiral Scratch was simultaneously a regionalist blow against the capital (Manchester versus London) and a conceptual exercise in demystification (“spiral scratch,” because that’s what a record materially is, a spiral groove scratched into vinyl). The back cover itemized details of the recording process, such as which take of the song they’d used and the number of overdubs. The EP’s catalog number, ORG-1, was a Left-leaning bookworm’s wisecrack: ORG-1 = ORG ONE = orgone, Wilhelm Reich’s neurolibidinous life force.

“*Spiral Scratch* was *playful*,” says Buzzcocks manager Richard Boon. “Play was very important.” That spirit came through in the EP’s most famous song, “Boredom,” which was simultaneously an expression of real ennui (“I’m living in this movie/but it doesn’t move me”) and a metapop comment on boredom as a prescribed subject for punk songs and punk-related media discourse—a topic that was predictable to the point of being, well, a bit *boring*. Pete Shelley’s deliberately inane two-note guitar solo sealed the conceptual deal: a “boring” solo that was actually thrillingly tension inducing in its fixated refusal to go anywhere melodically.

Although it wasn’t actually a new phenomenon at all, at that particular moment in history the idea of releasing your own music felt fantastically novel and revolutionary. *Spiral Scratch*’s initial pressing of one thousand copies, funded by loans from friends and family, sold out with staggering speed. It ultimately chalked up sales of 16,000 (with even more to come when it was reissued a few years later). This was an astonishing achievement given that a distribution network for independent records didn’t exist in 1977. “Mail order was very important,” says Boon. “Rough Trade was just a shop with a mail-order service in those days. And we knew the manager of Manchester’s Virgin shop and he persuaded some of his regional colleagues to stock it.” People were buying *Spiral Scratch* for the music, but also for the sheer *fact* of its existence, its status as a cultural landmark and portent of change.

But why was the idea of independently recording and releasing

music so surprising in 1977? After all, approximately 50 percent of American rock 'n' roll and R&B hits in the late fifties had been released through independent labels such as Sun and Hi. All through the sixties and seventies independents flourished in regional markets and niche genres, such as jazz (Sun Ra's Saturn, the U.K. free-improv imprint Incus), British folk (Topic), and Jamaican imports (Blue-beat). Even during the commercial boom of "serious," album-oriented rock, when major labels dominated the market, you still had crucial "progressive" independents like Virgin and Island. But there was a significant difference between these labels and the postpunk independents. "The people who started Virgin and Island were enterprising, sure, and 'independent' in terms of what they did creatively," says Iain McNay, founder of leading postpunk indie Cherry Red. "But they had the support of major record company distribution, finance, and marketing."

Just before punk, a couple of labels formed that were independent in terms of their financing and distribution. Chiswick and Stiff both emerged from England's pub rock scene. Chiswick debuted with the amped-up R&B of the Count Bishops in November 1975, Stiff with a Nick Lowe single the following year. Unlike the amateur-hour neophytes of New Hormones, though, the figures behind the pub rock indies were seasoned veterans of the record business, entrepreneurially savvy insiders. Furthermore, neither Chiswick nor Stiff made an ideological meal out of being independent. Both soon eagerly hooked up with major-label distribution, with Stiff becoming a leading New Wave hit maker behind Ian Dury and Elvis Costello.

When punk came along, the top bands without exception fell back into the traditional way of doing things. "The disappointing thing for me historically was the Clash and Sex Pistols' signing to majors," says Geoff Travis, cofounder of Rough Trade. Even Buzzcocks buckled under. After the group's original singer, Howard Devoto, quit, Richard Boon and the band planned to put out another independent record through New Hormones, an EP to be titled *Love Bites*. "But then the drummer's dad came to see me, saying his son had just left school and had an offer of a job as an insurance clerk and 'what are you going to do with the band?'" recalls Boon. "So that was when we had to decide 'God, we're in this for real!' Which meant finding other resources. Which meant signing to a major. Because doing it independently wasn't supportable at that point, you couldn't just get enough revenue selling through mail order and a few sympathetic retailers."

As the band's manager, Boon got Buzzcocks a deal with United Artists, and *Love Bites* ended up being the title of the group's second album for the major label. But as an amateur entrepreneur he continued New Hormones as a back-burner operation for several

years, sporadically releasing esoteric postpunk like the Pete Shelley side project the Tiller Boys and Ludus, an arty feminist band fronted by the charismatic Linder (whose real name was Linda Sterling). Released at the very end of 1977, almost a full year after *Spiral Scratch*, ORG-2 wasn't even a record, but a booklet of collages by Linder and Jon Savage. "It didn't have a cover price, so it didn't sell very well. Nobody knew what to sell it for!" laughs Boon. "But it did its job. The title *The Secret Public* was all about that other side of the DIY thing—trying to locate kindred spirits who would 'get it' and respond."

In 1977, many people did "get" *Spiral Scratch* and responded to it as a call to action. "My girlfriend Hilary gave me a copy and that was the key moment," says Bob Last, founder of the Edinburgh indie Fast Product. The idea of Fast Product already existed in his mind as a brand, but Last had no specific ideas about what the actual merchandise would ultimately be. "I had a logo and an idea of the attitude the company would embody, but it was *Spiral Scratch* that gave me the idea of music as the product. I popped into the Bank of Scotland and said, 'I'm going to put a record out, can I borrow some money?' And bizarrely they gave me a few hundred pounds! I had *absolutely no idea* there'd been a history of independent labels before that. *Spiral Scratch* turned my head around."

A former architecture student and technician/designer for a traveling theater club, Last conceived Fast Product as a hybrid of art project and renegade commerce. The company's first press release trumpeted the slogan "Interventions in any media" as a sort of all-purpose promise/threat. Starting with the Mekons' "Never Been in a Riot" single in January 1978, Fast's products were strikingly designed and highly collectible. At a time when business—big *or* small—was regarded suspiciously as "the Man" and consumerism was something to feel guilty about, Fast Product provocatively highlighted the notion of the commodity as fetish. This became the label's signature balancing act, celebrating consumer desire while simultaneously exposing the manipulative mechanisms of capitalism. Fast Product represented an emergent Left sensibility that would flourish in the eighties, a "designer socialism" purged of its puritanical austerity and fear of pleasure, attracted to stylishly made things but vigilant about being hoodwinked or exploited.

Like New Hormones had done with *The Secret Public*, Fast Product moved quickly to show that it was more than just a record label. FAST 3, *The Quality of Life*, consisted of a plastic bag filled with nine Xeroxed collages—including pictures of German terrorists, taken from a Sunday newspaper's color magazine but labeled "entertainment"—along with various items of consumer detritus. "We had someone

carefully peeling oranges and putting a bit of peel in each bag, to guarantee that each package would be unique, with a different pattern of rotting on each strip of peel.” A later nonmusical release, *SeXex*—another plastic bag, this time containing a dozen Xeroxed sheets, a badge, and an empty soup carton—was conceived as a promotional campaign for a totally imaginary corporation. “Both *Quality of Life* and *SeXex* used the cut-up, photocopied aesthetic of the time,” says Last. “But what drove them was this sense that they were a perverse advertising campaign for a product that didn’t actually exist. And they sold quite well, got debated and referred to quite extensively.”

“The first really arty, clever label was Fast Product,” says Tony Wilson, cofounder of Manchester independent Factory Records. “A hell of a lot more arty than us. If I could have put orange peel in a plastic bag and released it with a catalog number, I would have been very proud!” A local TV host, Wilson was a Cambridge-educated aestheteprovocateur who loved record packaging and wanted his label to have a clear design aesthetic. He got young design student Peter Saville to give Factory its own visual identity, influenced by the starkness and severe functionalism of early twentieth-century modernist design movements such as Bauhaus, De Stijl, constructivism, and Die Neue Typographie. Saville’s record sleeves and label typography made Factory and its groups—Joy Division, Durutti Column, A Certain Ratio—stand out from the postpunk pack. The austere elegance was a new thing in rock packaging, a cleansing break both with prepunk romanticism and New Wave’s own clichés. The label’s first release, *A Factory Sample*, was a double EP packaged in glistening silver. “It just seemed so special,” says Paul Morley, who was *NME*’s Manchester correspondent at the time. “The fact that it was so beautiful looking showed the possibilities of what could be done, and it showed up the London record industry for being so boring.”

Soon Factory was outdoing Fast Product’s collectible *Earcom* samplers and bizarre packages like *Quality of Life* by bringing a Marcel Duchamp-like absurdism to their catalog. Numbers were assigned to anything and everything: pipe dreams, whims, unrealized projects, movies that were never finished or never started. Fac 8 was a menstrual egg timer proposed by Linder but never actually constructed. Fac 61 was a lawsuit from the label’s former house producer Martin Hannett. Fac 99 was a dental bill for Factory codirector Rob Gretton, who’d had his molars reconstructed.

For Wilson, this sort of mischief was in the prankster spirit of the situationists, a French anarcho-Dada movement of the sixties whose ideas he admired. The situationists believed that rediscovering play was the remedy for “the poverty of everyday life,” the feelings of

alienation amid abundance generated by Western consumer society. Above all, they wanted to smash “the spectacle,” all those mass-media forms of entertainment such as television that enforce passivity rather than participation. The situationists were also scathing critics of commodity fetishism, however, so it’s pretty unlikely that they would have approved of Factory’s sumptuously designed records.

In truth, the only remotely situationist aspect to Factory was what Wilson described as the label’s “continual denial of profit.” No contracts were signed with the groups, who were free to leave when they liked and retained ownership of their own music. “I sometimes flatter myself that the way we behaved, which was not about wanting to be rich, and the way we lived out that attitude every day, was maybe what might’ve been suggested by the situationist philosophy,” says Wilson. Weirdly combining a sometimes ruinous aesthetic perfectionism (covers that cost more than the profit margins) with lackadaisical nonprofessionalism, Factory didn’t act like a business at all.

Far from Fast Product’s and Factory’s sly, postmodern games, the punk band Desperate Bicycles had a much more dour but probably more faithful take on the situationist antagonism to “the spectacle.” Do-it-yourself, for Desperate Bicycles, meant the overthrow of the establishment music industry through people seizing the means of production, making their own entertainment, and selling it to other creative and autonomous spirits. DIY’s most fervent evangelists, the Desps chanted “it was easy, it was cheap—go and do it” at the end of their early 1977 debut “Smokescreen.” That slogan then became the chorus of “The Medium Was Tedium,” the follow-up released later that same year. “No more time for spectating,” they declared on “Don’t Back the Front,” an antifascist anthem on the flip side of “Medium,” adding the listener-inciting battle cry “cut it, press it, distribute it/Xerox music’s here at last.” A sleeve note revealed that “Smokescreen” had cost only £153 and said the band “would really like to know why you haven’t made your single yet.” As for the Desps’ actual music, it was almost puritan in its unadorned simplicity, its guitar sound frugal to the point of emaciation. For the Desperate Bicycles, it was as though sloppiness and scrawniness became signs of membership in the true punk elect. The very deficiency of traditional rock virtues (tightness, feel) stood as tokens of the group’s authenticity and purity of intent.

The Desperate Bicycles’ 1977 singles had an even bigger impact in the U.K. than *Spiral Scratch*. The demystify-the-process data on the back of “The Medium Was Tedium” and the group’s fervent exhortation “now it’s your turn” catalyzed a scrappy legion of do-it-yourself bands. Among them were many of the key figures of the

postpunk era: Swell Maps, Scritti Politti, Young Marble Giants, the Television Personalities, Thomas Leer, and Daniel Miller, aka the Normal. “I don’t know if I ever heard their records, I just got infected by the energy and inspiration the Bicycles put across in this *Melody Maker* article about how easy it was to make a record,” says Miller, who in 1977 was a twenty-six-year-old fan of German electronic music and a thwarted musician. After reading the *MM* feature, he rushed out and bought a secondhand Korg synth for £150 and then worked overtime at his film-editing job until he could afford a four-track ministudio. Working in his North London bedroom, he created “T.V.O.D.” and “Warm Leatherette,” the two sides of his self-released debut single as the Normal. “I never thought of approaching a ‘major’ label,” he recalled. “I didn’t like them because they’d ruined quite a few of my favorite bands—like Virgin did with Can, Faust, and Klaus Schulze.”

The Normal’s sound was electropunk. “Warm Leatherette” especially—all harsh stabs of analog-synth distortion and dispassionately perverse lyrics about the eroticism of car accidents, via Ballard’s *Crash*—could hardly have been further from the floridly romantic keyboard synth arpeggios of prog rock. The single did unexpectedly well, selling thirty thousand copies, and inadvertently turned Miller into the CEO of his own record label. Mute Records was the name he’d put on the back of the single, along with his home address. Many people assumed Mute was a proper record label specializing in weird electropop. Within a week of the release of “Warm Leatherette,” all kinds of peculiar demo tapes started arriving in the mail. “Fad Gadget was the first one I liked enough to want to put out,” Miller recalls. “Before I knew it I was running a record company—working from home, with no staff or anything like that, but a record label nonetheless.”

In mid-1978, a curious spate of cultural synchronicity found “Warm Leatherette” being released at around the same time as several other lo-fi electronic singles, all put out on indie labels: Throbbing Gristle’s “United,” Cabaret Voltaire’s *Extended Play* EP, Human League’s “Being Boiled,” Robert Rental’s “Paralysis,” and Thomas Leer’s “Private Plane.” “There was this period when they all came out, one after the other,” recalls Leer. “And it was like, ‘Where are all these weird records coming from?’ None of us knew each other. There was obviously something brewing.”

Actually, Thomas Leer and Robert Rental did know each other. Two Scottish friends who’d moved down to London at the height of punk, Leer and Rental, like Miller, were inspired to put out their own records by the Desperate Bicycles’ example. Renting a multitrack recorder for five days, they took it to Leer’s apartment in Finsbury

Park to record his songs, then moved it across the Thames River to Rental's Battersea pad. "The records came out at the same time and they sounded similar, because we actually made them together," says Leer. They also looked alike, with Xeroxed covers and hand-stamped labels. Leer and Rental were so captivated with the DIY ethos that they each decided to operate their own labels—Oblique and Regular, respectively—rather than jointly release via the same imprint. Leer only pressed 650 copies of "Private Plane" backed with "International," but one of them made it to the office of *NME*, where it was made Single of the Week.

"Private Plane" sounded electronic, but Leer didn't actually own a synth. Instead he processed his guitar and bass using various gadgets and played Rental's stylophone (a gimmicky electronic keyboard played with a pen) through an echo effect. All these gauzy silverswirl textures gave "Private Plane" an ethereal feel perfect for its mood of remote serenity tinged with wistfulness, loosely inspired by a recent TV program about the reclusive multimillionaire Howard Hughes. Leer's fey voice is equally perfect, but owed something to contingency: He had to whisper the vocal because the recording took place at night in his one-room apartment and he didn't want to wake his girlfriend.

More so than on the electronic squad, however, Desperate Bicycles' biggest impact was on the noisy-guitar brigade. Teenagers growing up in Solihull—a middle class suburb on the edge of the Midlands industrial city Birmingham—Swell Maps were a gang of friends centered around two brothers who hated their given surname (Godfrey) so much they renamed themselves Nikki Sudden and Epic Soundtracks. When "Smokescreen" came out, Swell Maps had actually existed for five years already as a sort of imaginary rock band, getting together to record albums on reel-to-reel tape recorders and turning them into cassettes complete with cover art and even inner-sleeve booklets.

"We would set up recording studios in the house when our parents went on holiday," says Sudden. "But it wasn't until Desperate Bicycles did their first single that we realized you could actually go book a professional studio and make a record. We thought only major labels could hire them, which seems ridiculous now! As soon as we grasped that anyone could do it, we immediately booked this place in Cambridge called Spaceward, which used to advertise in the back of *Melody Maker* and cost one hundred fifty pounds for a ten-hour session."

Pooling their savings and borrowing more from the Godfreys' parents, Swell Maps pressed two thousand copies of their debut, "Read About Seymour." Released on the group's own label, Rather, the single is often said to be about Seymour Stein, founder of the New Wave—

friendly U.S. label Sire, who'd signed Talking Heads and the Ramones. Actually, the title refers to a totally different Seymour Stein, this one known as the "king of the mods" in 1960s England. The lyrics, though, were composed in cut-up fashion. Another song spliced its lyrics together by combining text from an Enid Blyton children's story with words from a book about fighter pilots. Swell Maps were obsessed with war, but in a whimsical and boyishly innocuous way. "Then Poland," "Midget Submarines," and "Ammunition Train" drew on military history (especially the Spanish succession wars of the early eighteenth century) and the boys' adventure story character Biggles, also a fighter pilot. The Maps also loved Gerry Anderson's marionette TV shows of the sixties, *Thunderbirds* and *Stingray*. A *Stingray* episode provided the title for Swell Maps' debut album, *A Trip to Marineville*. "I'd say our biggest influences were T. Rex, Can, and Gerry Anderson," says Sudden. "Which isn't a bad combination. We always wished we could use Barry Gray, the guy who did all the *Thunderbirds* themes, to do orchestrations of our tracks."

Along with their pals the Television Personalities, Swell Maps invented a whole strand of postpunk that made a fetish of naïveté, characterized by weak vocals, shaky rhythms, rudimentary droning basslines, and fast-strummed discords. The DIY bands reveled in the noise-generating potential of the guitar, but they didn't exactly *rock* and they certainly didn't *roll*. For believers, much more than the "sped-up heavy metal" that was first-wave punk, this was the true realization of the here's-three-chords-now-start-a-band ethos—except some of the groups didn't even have three chords. "It took me two years to learn two chords," Sudden told *NME*. "I can't ever see ourselves becoming polished, note perfect and all that. We hardly ever rehearse—about once every six months."

Fervent amateurs, Swell Maps believed bands got ruined when they depended on playing gigs and releasing records in order to make a living. One of the reasons the group split, shortly before the release of their second album *Jane From Occupied Europe*, was that they were becoming too successful, with a tour of America looming. Many of the groups in Swell Maps' wake, though, went a step further and equated amateurism with amateurishness, the deliberate avoidance of anything that smacked of professionalism or slickness. From the liberating declaration that "anyone can do it," DIY became a confining injunction to *sound* like anyone can do it. Swell Maps themselves were always more expansive and experimental than this: For every frantic racket such as "Let's Build a Car," there was an eerie metallic instrumental, such as "Big Empty Field," clangorous and full of cavernous hollows, the missing link between Neu! and Sonic Youth.

Swell Maps initially had some problems shifting "Read About

Seymour.” Sales of the debut single stalled at around 750 copies, despite an early boost of support from Radio One DJ John Peel, who played the single more than a dozen times within three weeks on his late-night show. The day after coming up to London to record a Maps session for Peel, Sudden happened to walk past Rough Trade’s record shop, which also doubled as the headquarters of the fledgling Rough Trade distribution company. “One of the guys asked, ‘Have you got any of your single left?’ and I said, ‘Oh, about a thousand.’ So he said, ‘We’ll take the lot.’”

The alliance that subsequently developed between Rough Trade and Swell Maps was a prime example of the role the London label rapidly assumed as enabler in chief for the U.K. independent movement. Initially Rough Trade had seemed like just another one of the first wave of postpunk indie labels, no more central than other pioneers such as Small Wonder, Cherry Red, Rabid, Industrial, and Step Forward. But soon it started to dispense information, encouragement, and support to other young labels. Most crucially, Rough Trade fronted money to bands to enable them to start their own labels or press more copies of a release. Often it formed partnerships with small, one-band labels (such as Swell Maps’ own Rather) in which Rough Trade paid for the pressing of the record and got distribution rights for the release. On one level, this was a canny form of enterprise (Rough Trade made much of its money from distributing independent records). But these “P&D” (pressing and distribution) deals were also freighted with an intense charge of idealism. Rough Trade was ideologically committed to helping individuals achieve self-realization through creative autonomy. Daniel Miller, for instance, was given three hundred pounds to press an extra two thousand copies of “Warm Leatherette,” which Rough Trade then distributed. They also provided a base for his fledgling Mute label. Says Miller, “I didn’t have an office, so they let me get the records delivered there from the pressing plant, and do my mail-outs from their HQ.”

Like many independents of this era and afterward, Rough Trade was a record store before it was a record label. A music-obsessed Cambridge graduate, Geoff Travis hitchhiked across America in his midtwenties. He picked up “literally hundreds of records by the time I got to San Francisco,” then shipped them back to London. A fantasy was forming in his head about “opening a shop where you could listen to records all day without anyone bothering you too much.” Acquiring stock from a bankrupt Cambridge record store, Travis eventually settled on scuzzy, low-rent Ladbroke Grove as a London location that offered sufficient “passing trade” thanks to its mix of bohemians and reggae-loving Rastafarians from the local Caribbean population.

Opening in February 1976, Rough Trade “became a magnet for the local community,” says Travis. “It was somewhere you could hang out and browse without anyone harassing you, this place where you could listen to music really loud all day long. We had comfy chairs, huge speakers pumping out music, and all the reggae prereleases, which I’d buy every week from a warehouse in North London.” Because Joe Strummer’s 101ers played nearby at the Elgin pub, and Mick Jones lived by the Westway flyover, “Rough Trade made the connection with punk really early,” says Travis. “And Steve Jones from the Sex Pistols would come in to sell records he’d stolen!” Rough Trade was the only place in London where you could buy American imports such as *Punk* magazine and singles by Pere Ubu and Devo released on their own tiny independents Hearthan and Booji Boy.

Although it was a privately owned company, Rough Trade was run as if it were collectively owned by the workers. Everyone had equal say and equal pay. “They actually had a ‘rota’ [rotation] system, with everyone taking turns to make the tea or do the sweeping up,” says Tony Fletcher, teenage editor of *Jamming* fanzine, who used to hang out at Rough Trade after school, still wearing his uniform. Constant meetings took place, during which weighty ideological issues and mundane operational details were discussed with equal fervor. This kind of communal ethos was easily mocked as a hippie throwback, but Travis stresses that “although people have this antileftist view of co-ops as disorganized, with people sitting around talking all day and nothing ever getting done, Rough Trade wasn’t like that at all. It worked for a number of years and we got a lot done. But the lines of responsibility were quite clear—people looked after different areas.”

Collectivist values of this sort were very much part of the radical culture of the midseventies. Both *Libération*, the French left-wing newspaper, and *Time Out*, London’s bohemian listings magazine, were run as cooperatives, with no hierarchy or pay differentials. By the late seventies, there were around three hundred cooperatives in the U.K., half of them whole-food shops, the rest ranging from radical bookstores to crafts stores. It was actually during the early to midseventies that the counterculture ideas of the previous decade were most widely disseminated and implemented. Squatting, for instance, was “huge,” recalls Travis. “I lived in squats all over London.” But the cooperative movement wasn’t just about grubby commune-dwelling hippies and anarchist dropouts. Collectivist ideas had currency in the political mainstream. In 1974, the Labour government’s resident hard Left cabinet member Tony Benn had grand plans for state-subsidized workers’ co-ops that would take over failed companies, something that actually happened with the *Scottish Daily News* and the motorcycle company Norton Villiers Triumph.

In addition to deriving inspiration from British socialist culture, Travis could also draw on his firsthand experience of kibbutz life in Israel. “I’m Jewish, and my parents sent me one summer to visit my distant relatives, and I spent some time on a kibbutz. There was a lot of idealism in the early days of the movement. The impetus was quite pure. I liked the way they were organized—people having breakfast together, living communally, making decisions in a relatively rational way. Everyone knows what’s going on. It seemed a more sensible way to run things—semiutopian, but not impossible.”

As with other record shops turned labels, the Rough Trade staff’s day-by-day activity—sifting through releases and judging which ones were good, the innumerable small decisions about how many of a particular record to stock and whether to reorder—soon evolved into an A&R-like intuition about what was “hot” musically and where postpunk as a whole was heading. Still, two full years elapsed between the opening of the store and the label’s debut release in February 1978: Metal Urbain’s “Paris Maquis.” “We thought they were the French Sex Pistols,” says Travis. Next came an Augustus Pablo single. But it was ROUGH 3—the *Extended Play* EP by Sheffield experimental trio Cabaret Voltaire—that really tapped the emergent postpunk gestalt.

The same egalitarian idealism that informed the workaday operations of Rough Trade governed its dealings with artists. Contracts were for one record at a time and based around a 50/50 split of the profits between band and label. “We fronted all the money for recording, promotion, whatever,” says Travis. “The artists provided their labor, inspiration, and genius. The fifty/fifty split has since been adopted by countless indie labels—Joy Division at Factory, Depeche Mode at Mute, they were all on that arrangement.”

One advantage to these one-off deals, typically based around verbal agreement and personal trust rather than lawyers and contracts, was their rapid-response nature, so much more suited to the speedy stylistic fluctuations of the postpunk universe. “It meant you could see an amazing band and say ‘let’s make a record’ that very night, and in four weeks, the record’s out,” says Travis. “You could get on with it.” Travis also believes the 50/50, one-record-at-a-time deals helped create a nurturing environment for bands. “It creates the psychological conditions for musicians to do their best work if they are in control but they have a partner who is not weak, who can help them.” In contrast, the major-label system seduced bands with large advances against future royalties, in return for signing away their lives, and then put them under immense pressure to achieve sales. “It doesn’t matter how much ‘creative control’ a band is given,” Travis told *Rolling Stone*. “You’re still indentured. Long-term contracts will

put a band in debt from recording and touring costs. Then you have to produce when you're not ready. You have to write songs when you have nothing to say." Few bands survive to the sixth or eighth album designated in their contracts.

There was a downside to the 50/50 split, though, according to Nikki Sudden. "You make a lot of money if you sell a lot of records, but if you don't sell many or any, you don't get *anything*." With no advance to cover living expenses, bands were unable to give up their day jobs. Still, they could always work at Rough Trade, as many of the label's artists did. "Me and Epic both worked in the shop for about a year," says Sudden. "I got sacked for being rude to the Rasta customers. They would come in and want to hear all the reggae prereleases, each six minutes long, all the way through, and you knew they were never going to buy anything. After a while I got fed up and put everything on for half a second!"

Having the musicians get their hands dirty as sales assistants or packing records up for distribution fit Rough Trade's philosophy. It had a faintly Maoist air, getting the intelligentsia to labor in the paddy fields. Certainly, Travis liked to think of the musicians less as artists or stars than as cultural workers. He talked of how Rough Trade was neither the record business nor art but a space of cultural production, involving collaboration and mutual support. It was this pragmatic, slightly dowdy vision that gave the label something of a "brown rice" image.

But then Rough Trade weren't into romanticizing things or preserving the mystique of rock 'n' roll. They believed in demystification. "People exert control through mystification," says Travis. "They like to make you think it's all over your head. Recording engineers can be like that in the studio. I'd got no studio background at all, but I produced 'Nag Nag Nag' by Cabaret Voltaire and coproduced records by the Raincoats, Stiff Little Fingers, the Fall. We didn't really know what we were doing, but at that point in history, you had the confidence to just go ahead and do it."

Without effective distribution, the do-it-yourself ethos was just shouting into the void. But Travis adamantly opposed the idea of infiltrating the mainstream and signing to majors in order to use their distribution muscle. "Changing things from the inside is nonsense," he declared. Where were the historical examples of anyone who'd actually done this? Rough Trade's greatest achievement was organizing the Cartel, an independent distribution network built around an alliance of London-based Rough Trade and Small Wonder and their regional counterparts Probe, Revolver, and Red Rhino. Nationwide distribution for small labels and self-released records held out the possibility for real communication, reaching a scattered

audience of like minds. It also meant one had a better chance of recouping costs and carrying on. Unglamorous but absolutely vital, the Cartel network provided the infrastructure for a genuinely alternative culture. Today Travis talks about independent distribution as being “based on a sound political principle—if you control the means of distribution, you have a great deal of power. It was obvious that the channels of culture were being controlled. It made me angry you couldn’t buy decent left-wing literature or the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* in retail chains like WHSmith. So there was a very clear political imperative to build a network of outlets for things we liked.”

“Things we liked” included not just records but fanzines, the print media version of do-it-yourself. “*Sniffin’ Glue* was so important,” says Travis of the pioneering punkzine. “We bought loads off its founder, Mark Perry, and also let him use our office as somewhere to staple it together.” By 1980, Rough Trade received an average of twelve new zines *each week*, and distributed nationwide the ones that passed its rigorous scrutiny for ideological soundness. “Rough Trade would actually tell fanzine editors, ‘We will read your zine and if there’s anything racist or sexist in it, we’ll return it,’” recalls *Jamming’s* Tony Fletcher. There were also unofficial interventions: “I remember getting some returned copies of *Jamming* and someone from Swell Maps had scrawled on it because they disagreed with my review of them! It was a very argumentative culture.”

A few blocks from Rough Trade’s Ladbroke Grove base stood a company called Better Badges, the market leader in New Wave badges (a crucial way of emblazoning your allegiances on your lapel in those heady days). Now the company “became the clearinghouse for zines,” says Fletcher. Better Badges’s owner, an idealistic hippie turned postpunker called Joly, offered fanzines something similar to Rough Trade’s P&D deals, a print-now/pay-later service to help fledgling zines get off the ground. Rough Trade, meanwhile, was becoming more and more businesslike and ambitious, diversifying into music publishing, organizing Rough Trade tour packages, and even talking about starting its own alternative culture magazine.

The idea of the independent label and the DIY movement was so new and exciting then, says Travis, “that people would rush out and buy *anything* that was part of it. This is what people forget. Back then, the records used to *sell*. Nowadays, you’d shift maybe two thousand if you were lucky, but back then anything halfway decent sold from six to ten thousand.” Certain epochal singles—“Warm Leatherette” being a good example—could sell thirty thousand plus. But what really put the label on the map and made the majors sit up and take apprehensive notice was when *Inflammable Material*, the Rough Trade album by Belfast punk band Stiff Little Fingers, went straight onto the

U.K.'s national *pop* charts at number fourteen in February 1979.

By then alternative groups had their own target to aim for—the Independent Singles and Albums Charts, conceived by Cherry Red boss Iain McNay at the end of 1979 and initially published by the trade magazine *Record Business*. “Independent” was defined as independently produced, manufactured, marketed, distributed, and retailed. The weekly music papers had published indie charts before, but they’d been based on what was flying over the counter in a single record shop, whereas the *Record Business* charts used sales data from a host of small record stores across the country.

But although the independent charts hugely strengthened the scene’s sense of its own identity, some critiqued them for encouraging bands and labels to aim low, in the process creating a sort of neohippie ghetto. “I don’t believe in dropping out or alternative cultures or any of this nonsense,” Bob Last told *NME*. “I think the New Wave is about dropping *in*, fighting your way in. You’ve got to get in there and struggle.” Accordingly, Last encouraged Fast Product’s four major bands—the Mekons, Gang of Four, the Scars, and the Human League—to sign to the London-based majors at the earliest opportunity. Eventually, he sold the entire Fast Product back catalog to EMI and closed down the label, feeling its “intervention” had been completed.

This question of independence versus infiltration, regionalism versus centralization, was one area where Fast Product and Factory strongly disagreed. Tony Wilson had watched how the first indies in Manchester, New Hormones and Rabid, had capitulated to the capital. He recalls asking Rabid’s Tosh Ryan in the fall of 1977 why they’d let London-based major labels take their biggest artists, Jilted John and John Cooper Clarke. “I can remember him saying, ‘Oh being independent was just a little period we went through of idealism.’ It was as if the only point of indie labels was to exist for a few months so that managers could get their bands signed to majors.” Wilson was determined to resist the centripetal pull of London and build up a power base in Manchester, the city he loved. His fervent pro-provinces stance was echoed by other indie labels throughout Britain, especially those in the North and Scotland. For a period, the independent album chart invariably featured a couple of regional or city-based compilations each week, such as Cardiff’s *Is the War Over?* and Sheffield’s *Bouquet of Steel*.

From style-conscious conceptualists like Fast Product and Factory to the more earnest, businesslike operations like Rough Trade and Cherry Red, the U.K.’s postpunk independents often disagreed about music, packaging, politics, you name it. But for a brief golden age, a five-year stretch from 1977 to 1981, they were all in the same boat.

“The thing that united us,” says Daniel Miller, “was that none of us knew what we were doing! We were huge music enthusiasts, though, with a strong idea of what we liked and what we wanted. I had no grounding in business whatsoever. But all of a sudden you realized you could have access to this industry that had always seemed very mysterious. The record industry went from being pretty closed, which it was even during the first wave of punk, to totally open. And that encouraged a lot of people like me and Tony Wilson—not obvious record company people by any means—to get involved and make our dreams come true.”

THE POP GROUP AND THE SLITS

THE SLITS AND THE POP GROUP founded their own independent label, Y Records, which went through Rough Trade. But before the two groups joined up to form a kind of postpunk tribe, they both made separate stabs at the infiltrate-from-within strategy. Signed to major labels and releasing debut albums in 1979, the Pop Group and the Slits were regarded as two of the most exciting and innovative bands of postpunk's first wave.

The genius of the Pop Group lay in the way they were pulled every which way by their passion for black music. They couldn't settle on just reggae, or just funk, or just jazz, so they went full throttle for all three simultaneously. This identity crisis caused their ultimate downfall, but along the way the Pop Group's chaotic gigs and flawed but compelling records served as a blazing beacon for countless other bands looking for the way forward.

Funk was one of the things that sustained the future members of the Pop Group during the midseventies prepunk lull. "We were the Bristol Funk Army," says the group's singer, Mark Stewart. "We'd go to clubs and dance to heavy bassline imports from America, tracks by B.T. Express, Fatback Band, Ultrafunk. I was fourteen in 1975 but could get into clubs because I was six foot seven." For U.K. funkateers, clothes were as crucial as the music. "We wore things like brothel creepers, zoot suits, plastic sandals, mohair jumpers," recalls Stewart. "Later I discovered that in cities all over the U.K. before punk there'd been similar kids into funk and fifties clothes. And most of them got into punk when it arrived."

As for reggae, the Pop Group assimilated that almost like inhaling the Bristol air. The city had a substantial black population, due in large part to an influx of Caribbean immigrants in the 1950s, but also to the fact that Bristol was one of England's leading ports for the slave trade in the eighteenth century. Mostly concentrated in the St. Paul's area, Bristol's Caribbean population made the city one of the U.K.'s great zones of punk and reggae intermingling. A shabby neighborhood of terraced houses and low-rise apartment blocks, St. Paul's didn't really look like a ghetto, but in April 1980 it unleashed one of the most destructive antipolice riots in U.K. history. Stewart and future Pop Group drummer Bruce Smith and bassist Simon Underwood regularly ventured into St. Paul's to check out the blues parties. "Generally we'd be the only white guys there, but we'd never get any hassle," says Smith. "Well, maybe I'd get ripped off trying to buy weed, before I got wise!" They also devoured reggae vinyl. "Every Friday when we were fourteen or fifteen, we'd go to this record store

Revolver to check out the new reggae prereleases that had just arrived from London by van,” recalls Stewart.

Along with funk and reggae, the young friends began to explore jazz, thrilling to the ferocity of its abstract emotional expressionism, its lofty intellectual edge and cosmic ambition. Undeterred by lack of technique or formal grounding in the music, the Pop Group hurled themselves into improvisation, with Stewart’s howled vocals and Gareth Sager’s sax blasts being the most obviously “free” elements in the maelstrom. “My remembrance of us playing was that it was either really extraordinary or pretty awful,” laughs Smith. “There wasn’t much in between!” The Pop Group worshipped the Beat culture surrounding jazz and poets and writers like Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs. Stewart’s original fantasy version of the group was called the Wild Boys, after Burroughs’s novel.

Blue-eyed funkateers, white Rasta ranters, “beatniks of tomorrow,” as they dubbed themselves in one interview—the Pop Group refused to choose a single identity. Bearing impeccably hip references and exhibiting vaulting ambition, the Pop Group arrived on the postpunk scene with perfect timing, just when everyone was scratching their heads and wondering, “Where next?” Their impact on the music press was instantaneous. The Pop Group appeared on the front cover of *NME* in September 1978, before they even had a record out. Their very amorphousness made them a Rorschach blot for critical fantasy, a color-saturated canvas for exploring ideas about “after-punk.” “Older journalists dug us, because they could use us to talk about the stuff they secretly preferred to punk rock—dub, Captain Beefheart, Miles Davis’s early seventies records,” says Stewart.

It didn’t hurt that the Pop Group looked great. Their suits evoked both a timeless, unrock stylishness and a bracing sobriety and seriousness. In interviews, they came across as intellectual firebrands. Early features on the Pop Group typically started with the journalist’s marveling at the group’s erudition and argumentativeness while noting their impressive book and record collections. “We were sixteen, seventeen, staying up all night talking, smoking weed,” recalls Smith. Sparks flew as systems of thought—Wilhelm Reich’s libidinal liberation, Antonin Artaud’s theater of cruelty, situationism’s revolt against alienation—collided and came into friction. Drunk on ideas, the group dedicated itself to systematically breaking down all assumptions and received ways of thinking. “We started challenging everything right down to the core of personal relationships, the things between the audience and the band,” says Stewart. According to Vivien Goldman, a journalist friend of the band’s who dated Stewart for a while, “The Pop Group had this obsession with being endlessly in the vanguard of finding a new way of doing everything.”

Out of all this turmoil of inspiration and self-questioning emerged a kind of Dionysian protest music, a maelstrom of writhing noise and imagistic words that dissolved the artificial divisions between politics and poetry, lust and spirituality. Stewart saw the Pop Group as part of a grand tradition of politically engaged avant-garde artists, a continuum stretching from the radical salons of the French Revolution, through dadaists and surrealists who were also committed Communists, to 1960s movements like Fluxus and situationism, which saw radical art and political revolution as inseparable. Just as the situationists railed against affluent consumer society's "poverty of everyday life," Pop Group songs like "We Are Time" blazed with a rage to live. "Not wanting to just be alive," says Stewart, "but to rid yourself of all constrictions. We had this romantic idea of going through nihilism, this intense deconditioning process, and emerging on the other side with something really positive." Comparing the Pop Group to the then little-known syndrome of spontaneous human combustion, Stewart told *ZigZag*, "Our creating music is the result of acute internal pressure." Fire figured in the Pop Group's imagination as an ideal state of being, evoking inner-city riots, pagan rituals, the 1960s free jazz of Archie Shepp's *Fire Music*. One of the band's best songs, "Thief of Fire," used the Prometheus myth to talk about the quest for "prohibited knowledge, going into unknown areas."

The Pop Group's rise had a wildfire quality. Within a few shows, they became the epicenter of the Bristol postpunk scene. Soon they were opening up for major artists like Patti Smith, Elvis Costello, and the Stranglers, whose singer, Hugh Cornwell, was so infatuated that he produced and financed their demos. In the late spring of '78 the Pop Group accompanied Pere Ubu, then at the very height of their critical stature, on their debut tour of the U.K. The band began talking to Andrew Lauder, the founder of Radar Records (who put out Ubu's *Datapanik* EP). A veteran A&R man who'd deftly survived the transition between prepunk progressive music and the New Wave, Lauder had previously signed the Stranglers and Buzzcocks while working at United Artists. Now he was looking for cutting-edge groups for Radar, a quasi-autonomous label that combined an edgy, independent sensibility with all the benefits of major-label distribution.

Released by Radar in March 1979, the Pop Group's debut single, "She Is Beyond Good and Evil," was an exhilarating splurge of disco bass, slashing punk-funk rhythm guitar, and deranged dub effects, with Stewart caterwauling lines like "our only defense is together as an army/I'll hold you like a gun." Lyrically, says Stewart, the song was "a very young attempt to mix up poetic, existentialist stuff with political yearnings. The idea of unconditional love as a revolutionary

force—the way it kind of switches on a light, makes you hope for a better world, gives you this idealism and energy.”

To record “Beyond Good and Evil,” the Pop Group hooked up with Dennis Bovell, who at that point was the only British reggae producer brilliant enough to bear any comparison with the Jamaican greats like Lee Perry and King Tubby. A key figure in the U.K. reggae scene, Bovell had operated the Jah Sufferer Hi Fi Sound System, formed the popular British roots band Matumbi, and pioneered the hugely successful genre of lover’s rock (a homegrown U.K. fusion of reggae and soft American soul that appealed largely to women). If that wasn’t enough, he wrote and produced the backing music for militant poet Linton Kwesi Johnson’s albums while releasing his own LPs, like *Strictly Dub Wize*, under the name Blackbeard. Bovell’s musical scope stretched way beyond reggae, though. He’d played lead guitar in a Hendrix-influenced band called Stonehenge and believed that Jimi had created the first dub track ever in 1967 with “Third Stone from the Sun.”

Bovell’s mix of acid rock wildness and dub wisdom made him the perfect foil for the Pop Group. For “3:38,” the B-side to “Beyond Good and Evil,” he took the A-side’s music and ran it backward, psychedelic-style, then built a new rhythm track for it with Bruce Smith. “That really blew the band away,” Bovell chuckles. Necessity was the mother of invention here. “We’d almost run out of studio time, that’s why I reused the A-side.” Creative *and* cost-efficient, Bovell was the ideal candidate for the not so enviable task of giving the Pop Group’s unruly sound some semblance of cohesion.

Working on their debut album *Y*, Bovell quickly grasped that the rhythm section held the whole band together. “Simon Underwood and Bruce Smith, they were the Sly and Robbie of the postpunk period, *tight*,” says Bovell. “The thing that was *not* together about the Pop Group was Gareth Sager’s and John Waddington’s guitars and Mark’s singing, which would be drifting all across the frame.” Although the sheer funk force of Underwood and Smith makes the up-tempo songs like “We Are Time” physically compelling, elsewhere *Y* veers into texture-saturated abstraction with sound paintings like “Savage Sea” and “Don’t Sell Your Dreams.” Distended with effects and positively varicose with creativity, *Y* garnered a mixed reception. Typically, the faint praise was something along the lines of *NME*’s verdict, “A brave failure. Exciting but exasperating.” Today, it seems a notch more admirable and impressive, a heroic mess, glorious in its overreach.

The Slits started from the same chaotic place as the Pop Group, but unlike the latter, they didn’t initially have a solid rhythm section to anchor the anarchy. Only the faintest subliminal skank indicated the Slits’ punky reggae intentions. Whereas other punk bands talked about

not being able to play but were secretly competent, the Slits were genuinely inept. Some people reckon the “true” Slits sound is their early naïve cacophony, the glorious racket of girls struggling with their instruments and vocal cords, impelled forward by sheer glee and gall. Actually, the Slits got better when they got, ah, *better*, picking up some rudimentary instrumental skills and establishing a firmer rhythmic foundation following the departure of original drummer Palmolive, who was unable to provide the reggae-inflected groove the rest of the band wanted. The Slits enlisted a male drummer called Budgie (who would later join Siouxsie and the Banshees) for their classic 1979 debut album *Cut*, on which producer Dennis Bovell also played a crucial role, helping the Slits transform their rampaging racket into a more shapely disorder.

In the beginning, though, the Slits were a feral girl gang, onstage and offstage. Just fifteen years old in 1977, singer Ari Up recalls being “wild and crazy, like an animal let loose, but an innocent little girl with it too.” From her striking image (tangled dreadlocks, underwear worn on the outside of her clothes) to her seemingly presocial antics, Ari Up inspired fear and fascination in equal measure. On one infamous occasion, she urinated onstage. “It wasn’t to shock anyone,” she insists. “I needed to pee. There wasn’t a toilet near. So I pissed onstage—on the side, but everyone in the audience saw it. I just didn’t care.” The singer came from a wealthy German background, but her heiress mother, Nora, was a bohemian and a rock scenester. The family home served as an open house for all kinds of stars, from Yes vocalist Jon Anderson to the Clash’s Joe Strummer. Slits guitarist Viv Albertine attended art school, where she met the Clash’s Mick Jones. Blonde, charismatic, and trailing a host of male punk admirers, Albertine shared a squatted apartment with Keith Levene and played in a short-lived band with him and Sid Vicious called Flowers of Romance. Balefully dark-haired and laconic, bassist Tessa Pollitt came from another all-girl punk group who trumped the Slits with a name—the Castrators—worthy of radical feminist Valerie Solanas, founder of the Society for Cutting Up Men.

A fan of Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto*, Malcolm McLaren attempted to manage the Slits, seeing them as the female Pistols. Legend has it that his managerial come-on was, “I want to work with you because you’re girls and you play music. I hate music and I hate girls. I thrive on hate.” But instead of thinking up outrageous ideas worthy of Valerie Solanas or Sid Vicious, McLaren’s master plan was wildly sexist and degrading. After attacking the rock industry with the Pistols, he now wanted to infiltrate the disco movement. At first, he tried to get the Slits to sign to the cheesy German disco label Hansa. Then, when Island moved to sign the band and invited McLaren to make a movie

around them, he came up with a screenplay that envisioned the Slits as an all-girl rock band that goes to Mexico only to find themselves effectively sold into slavery and ultimately turned into pornodisco stars. The Slits shrewdly extricated themselves from McLaren's grasp. But they did sign to Island and started working on their debut album with Dennis Bovell in the summer of 1979.

Bovell was an obvious choice. The Slits, especially Ari Up, were reggae fiends. "We used to find the blues parties just following the bass," she says. "We would be streets away and listen for the vibrations. In those days, there were almost zero white people at sound system parties. But I got away with it because I was dancing the hell out of their blues parties. Back then the style of dancing was called 'steppers' and I was such a good stepper. I was also the only white girl with dreads. In fact I was the first person to have the 'tree'—I had my locks up in a tree-type shape." As Ari Up developed beyond the basic punk screech into plaintive, reedy singing, her Bavarian-meets-Jamaican accent made her sound a bit like a dreadlocked Nico, on spliff rather than smack.

Punk diehards sometimes claim that Dennis Bovell dulled the Slits' edges, domesticated them. But the Slits were ambitious. They wanted to be pop stars. Island boss Chris Blackwell thought that they had potential in spades and he gave Bovell as much studio time as was required. "The Slits had so much input that it was more a case of sorting out what should go," said Bovell. "They were just bulging with material and I had the task of sorting it out and saying 'this goes here.' It was like an enormous jigsaw puzzle all dumped in your lap." *Cut's* songs do often sound like polyrhythmic cogs and spindles cobbled together to form slightly shaky but captivating contraptions. Albertine's itchy-scratchy rhythm guitar darts between Pollitt's sinuous basslines and Budgie's clackety clockwork drums. According to Bovell, Albertine "was no Jimi Hendrixette. She'd do the occasional bit of single-note lead guitar, but mostly she was more like a female Steve Cropper from Booker T. and the MGs, doing all these great rhythm things. She was always very conscious of not wanting to play the guitar like a man, but actually trying to create a style of her own."

The most delightful element in the Slits' sound on *Cut* is the strange geometry of the clashing and overlapping vocals, as Albertine and Pollitt weave around Ari Up's shrill, slightly sour warble. On the opener, "Instant Hit," the girls form a roundelay of haphazard harmonies that the singer describes as "a kind of 'Frère Jacques' thing." Albertine's lyrics to "Instant Hit" depict an unhealthily thin boy who "don't like himself very much/'cos he has set his self to self-destruct"—a barbed portrait that applied equally to Sid Vicious and Keith Levene, her junkie bandmates in *Flowers of Romance*. "So

Tough,” a frenetic pisstake of macho posturing, gives way to the doleful skank of “Spend, Spend, Spend,” its sidling bass and brittle-nerved percussion perfectly complementing the lyric’s sketch of a shopaholic vainly trying to “satisfy this empty feeling” with impulse purchases. “Shoplifting” turns “Spend, Spend, Spend” inside out: The first song’s woman-as-consumerist dupe is transformed in the second’s petty-thief-as-feminist rebel. Frantic punk reggae, “Shoplifting” surges into adrenalized overdrive as Ari Up, caught red-handed, yells “do a runner.” The song climaxes with a shattering scream that mingles terror, glee, and relief at escaping the supermarket detective, a yowl that collapses into the giggled gasp, “I’ve pissed in my knickers!”

The fast songs on *Cut* are exhilarating—“Shoplifting,” “Love Und Romance” (a romance-as-brain-death parody), and the single “Typical Girls” (a diatribe against un-Slitty females who “don’t create, don’t rebel,” and whose heads are addled with women’s-magazine-induced anxieties about “spots, fat, unnatural smells”). The most emotionally haunting songs, though, are down-tempo and despondent in the mold of “Spend, Spend, Spend”: “FM,” “Ping Pong Affair,” and “Newtown.” The last takes its name from towns built from scratch after the Second World War, some encircling London and designed to absorb the capital’s population overflow, others built in the rural middle of nowhere. All of them, typically, started life as an architect’s and urban planner’s utopian vision before swiftly degenerating into characterless gridzones of anomie and despair. “Newtown” draws a disconcerting parallel between the normal citizens hooked on cultural tranquilizers like “televisiono” and “footballino” and the Slits’ own bohemian peers zonked on illegal narcotics. On the track, Albertine’s jittery scrape mimics the fleshcrawling ache of cold turkey. Withdrawal of an emotional kind inspired “Ping Pong Affair.” Ari Up measures out the empty postbreakup evenings with masturbation (“Same old thing yeah I know/Everybody does it”) and cigarettes.

Dub-inflected and desolate, *Cut*’s slow songs impart a spooky impression of atomized individuals numbing their pain with pop culture’s illusions, romance junkies and glamorholics adrift in a haze of cheap dreams. Underneath it all you can sense the Slits’ yearning for a simpler and more natural life. *Cut*’s famous cover photograph of the group as mud-smeared Amazons combines *nostalgie de la boue* with she-warrior defiance to jab the casual record shop browser right in the eye. Naked but for loincloths and war paint, the three Slits stand proudly bare breasted, outstaring the camera’s gaze. Behind them you can see the wall of a picturesque cottage, brambles and roses clambering up the side as if to underline the “we’re no delicate English roses and this is no come-hither look” stance. The cottage was Ridge Farm, the studio where Bovell produced *Cut*. Says Ari Up, “We

got so into the countryside when we were doing the album, to the point of rolling around in the earth. So we decided to cover ourselves in mud and show that women could be sexy without dressing in a prescribed way. Sexy in a natural way, and naked without being pornographic.”

Cut’s cover echoes the photo of the Mud People of Papua New Guinea on the front of *Y*. Like the Slits, the Pop Group pined for a lost wholeness that they imagined existed before civilization’s debilitating effects. On “She Is Beyond Good and Evil,” Stewart had declared, “Western values mean nothing to her.” A tape of African drumming preceded the Pop Group’s arrival onstage during their 1979 *Animal Instincts* Tour and they appealed to their fans via a *Melody Maker* interview to bring drums and whistles to the shows and transform them into tribal ceremonies. In another feature, Gareth Sager argued that Western civilizations, being “based on cities,” were sick because they were cut off from natural cycles, unlike African tribes where repression simply didn’t exist. He proposed abolishing school and spending the money to help people deindoctrinate themselves. The song “Words Disobey Me” even hinted that language itself might be the enemy, that underneath all the layers of conditioning lay a pure, inarticulate speech of the heart. “Speak the unspoken/First words of a child...We don’t need words/Throw them away,” beseeched Stewart.

The Slits shared the Pop Group’s idealization of noble savagery and pure instinct, a cult of innocence and intuition that sometimes took on an anti-intellectual tinge. The two groups got “so close we were like one tribe,” says Ari Up. Bruce Smith replaced Budgie as the Slits’ drummer and played both sets when the two groups did a joint tour of Europe. There was even tribal endogamy. Sager went out with Albertine, Sean Oliver (the last of Pop Group’s several bassists) fathered a child with Pollitt, and Bruce Smith dated and eventually married Neneh Cherry, a friend of Ari Up’s who had joined the Slits as a stage dancer and backing vocalist. Full merger as a single tribe was formally anointed in 1980 when the groups founded *Y*, their own indie label, administered by Pop Group manager Dick O’Dell. By that point the Slits had parted company with Island, while the Pop Group severed their links with Radar after learning to their horror about the parent company WEA’s own links to the Kinney conglomerate, which was involved in arms dealing.

The Pop Group’s mounting revulsion for corporate capitalism and corresponding desire for “purity” in a corrupt world inspired the single “We Are All Prostitutes,” the band’s first post-Radar release. Musically, it’s their most powerful recording. The lyrics, though, abandoned *Y*’s imagistic delirium for a histrionic rant against consumerism, “the most barbaric of all religions.” Stewart warned,

“our children shall rise up against us.” The Pop Group seemed to be changing from lusty poet-warriors to puritanical doomsayers. In interviews of the time, Sager declared that it was frivolous to be “talking about music” when they—the Pop Group, but implicitly all postpunk bands—could and should be discussing “external things,” such as politics, current affairs, famine, war. “I don’t see the point in entertaining just now, it’s pure escapism,” he told *NME*. “Rock and roll is taking your mind off reality.”

The Pop Group weren’t alone. Many postpunk musicians were fighting back with protest songs and benefit gigs galore. Rock Against Racism became the template for a host of issue-based campaigns, including Rock Against Sexism, Rock Against Thatcher, and Scrap the SUS, a campaign against nineteenth-century antivagrancy laws that enabled police to harass black youth at will on the grounds of “suspicious behavior.” The Pop Group did benefits for Scrap the SUS and Cambodia, amongst many other causes. “We gave away virtually all our money from concerts through doing so many benefits,” says Stewart. At one point, the Pop Group had to do a benefit for *themselves* because they’d gone into debt!

Still, something about the Pop Group’s stridency started to rub their former supporters the wrong way. The backlash came in March 1980, triggered by a split single that paired the Slits’ “In the Beginning There Was Rhythm” with the Pop Group’s “Where There’s a Will.” *NME*’s Ian Penman mockingly dissed them as “Bristol Baezes,” evoking sanctimonious sixties folkie Joan Baez. The second Pop Group album, *For How Much Longer Do We Tolerate Mass Murder?* got panned as self-righteous soapbox agitprop. The music was still fiery, and actually more focused than *Y*, but it was hard to stomach the crude finger-pointing of songs like “Blind Faith.” The band seemed to proceed methodically through a checklist of issues—“Justice” dealt with police brutality, “How Much Longer” with Nixon and Kissinger’s war crimes—and the self-flagellating guilt trip vibe was off-putting. “There Are No Spectators” chided the politically disengaged and passive, declaring, “There is no neutral/No one is innocent.” The album was relentlessly pinned to the specifics, from the sleeve with its collage of news clippings about outrages such as East Timor to songs such as “Feed The Hungry,” all blurted statistics and denunciation. Hectoring and lecturing, *For How Much Longer* was as unpoetic as a fringe leftist pamphlet.

For the Pop Group, and above all Mark Stewart—always the intellectual engine of the band, its autodidact bookworm—the shift to plainspeaking and speaking out was simply the righteous response to the urgencies of the era. Thatcher had surged to power in May 1979, carried by a massive political swing to the right. “It was a fiery time,

you felt something was about to kick off,” says Stewart of 1980’s apocalyptic atmosphere. “See, I never felt that politics was this dreary thing. When we were ranting, it was all from the heart. It came out in a mad rush.” Stewart had absorbed the music of the Last Poets, black Muslim radicals sometimes credited with inventing rap, who’d lashed “white devils” and Negro counterrevolutionaries alike on early seventies albums like *This Is Madness* and *Chastisement*. He’d also been hanging with Linton Kwesi Johnson and organizations like Race Today and the Radical Alliance of Black Poets and Players. Linton Kwesi Johnson didn’t exactly mince words: His antifascist anthem “Fite Dem Back” vowed “We gonna smash their brains in/’Cos they ain’t got nuffink in ’em.” Johnson wasn’t actually a Rasta (indeed he upset many Jamaicans when he mocked Rastafarianism as an ostrich religion), but his patois-thick voice and baleful cadences gave the words, which look simplistic on the printed page, a power and authority that Stewart aspired to.

For many white British bohemians, though, it was precisely roots reggae’s mystical millenarianism—Rasta’s imagery of “armagideon,” “crisis time,” retribution and redemption—that resonated with their own sense of internal exile. “We did feel like we were on the front line of Babylon,” recalls Vivien Goldman. “Rasta provided this mesh of the political, the spiritual, and the apocalyptic, and it helped you define your enemies.” There was friction, naturally, between trendy liberalism and Rasta’s Old Testament morals and sexual chauvinism, but the sheer inspirational force of the music swept reservations aside. “With the roots worldview, the logic was often questionable, but the feeling of spiritual uplift was undeniable,” says Stewart. “Going to sound systems with black mates, they were like huge evangelical meetings, and you didn’t get that kind of energy with rock gigs. That kind of yearning for a better world, that questioning of the system—it just made my hairs stand up on end.”

As Stewart felt the pull of reggae, admiring the way it could shout down Babylon without lapsing into sloganeering, the other members of the Pop Group were being tugged in the opposite direction. They wanted to explore their free-jazz side more deeply. “It wasn’t that I disagreed with the things Mark said,” recalls Bruce Smith. “I was just concerned about it getting so dogmatic. It was like Mark saw the music as just a vehicle, a platform for messages.” Stewart, in turn, found it increasingly “difficult to sing on the abstract stuff.”

Stewart was also becoming increasingly involved in organized protest during 1980, spending three months working in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament’s offices helping to coordinate a massive antinuclear rally to be held in Trafalgar Square. After almost withering away in the early seventies, CND’s membership resurged as

cold war fears intensified in the wake of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. NATO's December 1979 decision to install American-controlled cruise missiles in the U.K. convinced many Britons that their country was degenerating into little more than a U.S. launching pad. The Trafalgar Square rally in October 1980 was the last time the Pop Group performed together. "We did a version of William Blake's 'Jerusalem,' because I'd wanted to do a rallying cry for all the different age groups there," recalls Stewart. "That song is a real socialist anthem, but visionary and idealistic too, Blake being this real prophet." After this high point—playing to 250,000 people—the Pop Group fell apart. "An organic disintegration," says Stewart. "There was no ill will."

Meanwhile, the Slits drifted along, with Ari Up succumbing to a Rasta-infused mystic pantheism. "I just see the Creator in everything," she told an interviewer. Proposing a kind of cosmology of rhythm, "In the Beginning There Was Rhythm" hymned all the pulsating patterns that structure reality: "...God is riddim...Riddim is roots and roots is riddim...SILENCE! Silence is a riddim too!" She and Neneh Cherry had encountered the early underground hip-hop scene on a trip to New York, and hearing rap for the first time inspired her percussive, chanted delivery on "In the Beginning There Was Rhythm." "Every sound that you hear is rhythm," the singer explained. "Fucking is rhythm and so is the earth going round and every footstep and every heartbeat. The way you go about your music is the way you go about your life.... Rhythm and life go together."

As a sideline to the Slits, Ari Up formed New Age Steppers, a collaboration with dub producer Adrian Sherwood and his session musicians Creation Rebel. Another white reggae fanatic, Sherwood shared a squat in Battersea with Ari and Neneh. "Adrian was a hustler in a true sense," Ari says. "He managed various reggae artists and toasters, distributed reggae records and sold them out of the back of his van, taught himself how to do studio engineering. We partnershiped and I came up with the name New Age Steppers. 'Stepper' as in dancing to reggae, and 'New Age' as in representing the new millennium." Released in the first week of 1981, the group's debut single, "Fade Away," features one of Ari Up's finest vocal performances, but its trust-in-Jah fatalism (the power-hungry and money-minded will all "fade away," leaving the righteous meek to inherit the earth) seemed disconcertingly passive, suggesting a retreat into hippielike serenity.

One more Slits album, *Return of the Giant Slits*, saw the group abandon the independent scene for a major label, CBS, even bigger than Island. Influenced by African music, Sun Ra, and Don Cherry (Neneh's father and a pioneer of ethnodelic jazz), the record's diffuse,

low-key experimentalism fell into a hostile marketplace. In songs like “Animal Space,” Ari Up’s pantheism took an ecomystical turn. “Earth-beat,” for instance, was a lament for a sorely mistreated Mother Earth (“Even the leaves are wheezing/Even the clouds are coughing”). After the band finally fell apart, the singer fled Babylon (aka the industrial First World) in search of any remaining havens of unspoiled Nature. Flitting from rural Jamaica to the jungles of Belize and Borneo (where she lived with tribal Indians), she became a real earth mother with a family. For others in the Slits/Pop Group milieu, getting into world music sufficed. Africa’s “rhythms of resistance” became the new roots reggae for a certain sort of postpunk.

The Pop Group splintered into multiple bands. Maximum Joy and Pigbag pursued slightly different versions of funk. Pigbag, helmed by Simon Underwood and still associated with Dick O’Dell’s Y label, became a *real* pop group, scoring a massive U.K. hit with “Papa’s Got a Brand New Pigbag.” Bruce Smith and Gareth Sager, the Pop Group’s most fervent free-jazzers, formed Rip Rig & Panic, named after an old Roland Kirk album. They peppered their interviews with beatnik patter like “cat,” “dig,” and “out there,” while the music capered and cavorted in antic whimsy. Rip Rig & Panic was basically the Pop Group minus the reggae input and the politics. “Yeah, it was *only* the music,” says Smith. “We didn’t even have a singer. Sager and our piano player Mark Springer would warble a bit into the mike now and then, but we didn’t really have vocals until Neneh joined later.” In one early interview, Sager obliquely dissed erstwhile comrade Stewart, arguing, “It’s definitely time to give the moaners the elbow. I like the cats who are complaining but they’re saying ‘yeah’ at the same time.”

Stewart, meanwhile, developed a relationship with Adrian Sherwood and the musicians surrounding the latter’s On-U label. He sang on the first New Age Steppers album, then made his solo debut in October 1982 with a fully realized version of the English hymn the Pop Group massacred at Trafalgar Square. Produced by Sherwood and marrying churchy organ swells to dub’s thunderquake bass, “Jerusalem” unites Blake’s vision of Albion as promised land with the Zion of Rasta’s dreaming. Its declaration, “I shall not cease from mental fight nor shall my sword sleep at my side/”Til we have built Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land,” served as a mission statement for Stewart’s ongoing career as culture warrior. Amazingly, almost thirty years later he’s still shouting down Babylon.

GANG OF FOUR, THE MEKONS, AND THE LEEDS SCENE

IN BRITAIN, THE 1970S felt like one long crisis. There were endless strikes, power cuts, runs on the supermarkets by hoarding housewives, rising crime, student protests, and riots triggered by racist policing. Fascism resurged on the streets of major cities, while the IRA's terror campaign extended beyond Ulster to the mainland with pub bombings and assassinations. The kingdom was disunited, simmering with resentments. Some mourned the nation's lost imperial role and recoiled from the multicultural reality of modern Britain. Others pushed for revolution, seeing every successful industrial action as a worker's victory bringing the Glorious Day a little closer.

In the midseventies, the trade unions were at their absolute peak of power. Their rank and file understandably demanded pay raises to keep pace with runaway inflation, but this only made prices rise faster and the country feel even more out of control. Using their full arsenal of weapons—sympathy strikes, secondary picketing—the unions effectively brought down the Conservative government in 1974. During the period of Labour rule that followed, many felt the Trades Union Congress was effectively coregent with Prime Minister Jim Callaghan. An inevitable right-wing backlash gathered momentum. People speculated about coups being plotted by the military and whispered of private armies, led by retired brigadiers, training in English meadows under cover of darkness. Legitimate pressure groups emerged like the Middle Class Association and the National Association for Freedom, dedicated to taming the unions, resisting “declining standards,” and restoring the word “Great” to its proper place in front of “Britain.”

In this polarized context, the decision by a bunch of students at Leeds University to name their band Gang of Four was a provocative gesture. The name was a derogatory term for the four top leaders of China's Cultural Revolution Group, who'd been running the country right up until shortly after Mao's September 1976 death, when they were arrested by the People's Republic's new premier.

The 1965–68 Cultural Revolution—Maoism at its most radical and uncompromisingly antibourgeois—was fresh in the public memory. In 1977 you could still find Maoist groups active on many U.K. campuses. Gang of Four weren't actually Maoists, or even card-carrying Communists, but they were definitely products of the left-wing university culture of the seventies, which even more than the previous decade was characterized by student militancy. At Leeds and elsewhere throughout the U.K., students swelled the ranks of Trotskyite groups like the International Marxist Group and the

Socialist Workers Party and joined picket lines alongside striking miners and dockers.

While the committed activists spouted the textbook party line, a more diffuse left-wing academic culture existed based around an eclectic pick-and-mix approach to radical theory. This trendy-lefty autodidacticism was fueled by secondhand paperbacks and beginner's guides to the key thinkers of the twentieth century, including the neo-Marxist pantheon of Gramsci, Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno, and Althusser. *Leaving the 20th Century*, a slim, green, attractive-looking anthology of situationist texts and graphics, was *the* radical-chic fetish object of its era. Blending often incompatible systems of thought, the resulting hodgepodge lacked rigor from the stern standpoint of academics and ideologues alike. In rock music, though, even a little bit of rigor is rather bracing and galvanizing. Too much is plain *rigid*, of course, but Gang of Four managed to hit just the right balance. In the grand tradition of British art rock, theory helped Gang of Four achieve the sort of conceptual breakthroughs that more organically evolving groups never reach.

Leeds University's fine-arts department, which spawned Gang of Four and its sister groups the Mekons and Delta 5, encouraged this conceptual approach. Theory was considered inseparably intertwined with artistic practice. T. J. Clark, the department head, had been a member of the short-lived British chapter of the Situationist International. Terry Atkinson, the studio-painting tutor who wandered around discussing the students' work, had once belonged to the ultra-rigorous movement Art and Language. Drawing on Marxism and hardcore aesthetic theory, Art and Language created works that combined visual material with text (political posters, philosophy, even musical scores) and for a while even abandoned art production altogether for criticism. The Mekons' Tom Greenhalgh enjoyed Art and Language's sarcastic, combative approach, the way they ripped into other critics for being "wooly-minded and promoting the mystique of Art." Absorbing this sensibility, the Mekons and Gang of Four created a kind of metarock, radically self-critical and vigilant.

Leeds actually had an unusual density of art students. In addition to the university, says Greenhalgh, "Leeds Polytechnic had its own excellent art department, where a lot of work with performance and video was going on. And there was Leeds College of Art." Factor in all the nonart students in Leeds, and you had the recipe for considerable town-versus-gown tension. "It was a Northern working-class city with a bunch of students dumped in the middle, most of them not from Yorkshire," says Hugo Burnham, Gang of Four's drummer. "'Fookin' students!' was an expression you heard rather frequently!"

The tension was heightened by the not entirely unfounded

perception that the students bummed around doing “fook all” courtesy of the government’s undergraduate grants, getting drunk every night on dirt cheap subsidized beer in their college bars. Meanwhile, ordinary people either worked hard or, increasingly, subsisted on meager unemployment benefits. In the industrial parts of Yorkshire, the jobless figures more than doubled between 1973 and 1978 as the traditional heavy industries declined. As prospects for youth narrowed, the far Right prospered. Leeds became the Northern stronghold for the crypto-fascist National Front, while explicitly neo-Nazi organizations like the British Movement and the League of St. George were also active in the area. “Our very first gig, skinheads came looking for a fight,” recalls Burnham. “There was real tension. The skins were taunting Andy Gill and then he smacked one of them in the face with his guitar.” Ironically, the crop-headed Burnham often got mistaken for a skinhead himself. “They’d see me with my short hair, Doc Martens boots, and braces, and approach me and ask if I was a fan of Skrew-driver, the Oi! group.”

Burnham was actually studying drama at Leeds, oscillating between trying to set up a radical theater group and playing rugby, a game that suited his stocky physique. “I gravitated toward this fine-arts drinking crowd, they seemed like the most interesting people around.” The center of the scene was a pub called the Fenton, which was strategically located midway between the university and the polytechnic. A long-established hangout for radicals and nonconformists, its patrons mixed several generations of bohemians: bearded sixties relics, gays, anarchists, and “the new breed” in their leather coats and Doc Martens boots. “It was totally crowded, people squashed together and just raving it up,” recalls Greenhalgh. As much as Leeds’ fine-arts department, it was the Fenton’s beery ferment of argument that shaped Gang of Four and the Mekons.

Gang of Four thrived on friction. “Andy had really mastered the art of the put-down,” says Burnham. “He would bait you. You get that sense from his guitar playing, it’s very prickly.” Drawing on the jagged, choppy rhythm-as-lead style developed by Wilko Johnson of pub rock trailblazers Dr. Feelgood, Gill chipped out flinty harmonics and splintered funk, making the listener flinch from the shards shooting out of the speakers.

Love of Dr. Feelgood—the stripped-down sound, the aura of barely contained violence—united Gill, Burnham, and singer Jon King. But somewhere between their first gig in May 1977 and their first record, October 1978’s *Damaged Goods* EP, a drastic transformation took place. Recruited via an ad that described the group in Feelgood-like terms as a “fast rivvum & blues band,” bassist Dave Allen pushed the group firmly into the punk-funk zone. An accomplished player who’d

done session work, Allen had been looking to make music “like Stevie Wonder but heavy” before he met Gang of Four. In turn, the Gang trained their bassist to play more sparsely, using just “a quarter of the number of notes he was actually capable of playing,” according to Burnham. Gang of Four kept their music stark and severe. Andy Gill shunned sound-thickening effects like fuzz and distortion, while Burnham eschewed splashy cymbals. Avoidances defined the band’s style as much as positive choices. “Instead of guitar solos, we had anti-solos, where you stopped playing, just left a hole,” says Gill. The very fabric of the band’s sound was abrasively different. Valve amplifiers were verboten, says Gill. “Valves are what every guitarist today wants—they’re the prerequisite for a ‘fat’ rock tone, the ‘warmth’ that people talk about. I had transistorized amps—a more brittle, cleaner sound, and colder. Gang of Four were against warmth.”

Gang of Four also shunned the heat of rock spontaneity, the intuitive looseness of letting songs emerge “organically” out of jams. “No jamming—that was the *J*-word,” says Gill. “Everything was thought out in advance.” Burnham worked out unusual drum parts that inverted or frustrated the usual rock modes of rhythmic motion, like the mechanistic drum loop of “Love Like Anthrax,” and what Burnham calls the “continuous falling-down-the-stairs flow” of “Guns Before Butter.” Instead of stacking the instruments for a layered wall of sound, Gang of Four gave each of them room to breathe. Guitar, bass, and drums existed on more or less equal footing. In their most thrilling songs—the taut, geometrical paroxysm of “Natural’s Not In It,” for instance—*everything* worked as rhythm, just like in James Brown’s funk.

This egalitarian balance between players embodied the group’s collectivist beliefs. “It’s democratic music, where we don’t have a ‘star’ thing,” Jon King declared. Dave Allen insisted, “Gang of Four doesn’t believe in the individual, and we believe that whatever you do is ‘political’ with a small *p*.” These ideals permeated every aspect of the group’s existence, from the way the music was jointly composed to the four-way split of publishing rights to the constant, fiery debates about internal affairs and external issues. And every member of the group and its entourage got paid the same wage (thirty pounds), except for the roadies, who got *double* during tours.

In the early days, the Mekons were an extension of this sprawling collective. “Without actually having headed notepaper to prove it, Gang of Four and Mekons were virtually a cooperative, sharing equipment and a rehearsal space,” says Burnham. “We did gigs together, taking turns to headline.” The Mekons’ version of democratized rock differed from Gang of Four’s, though. It was less disciplined and clenched, more shambolic and sloppy. Guitarist Kevin

Lycett listed the group's founding principles: "that anybody could do it; that we didn't want to be stars; that there was no set group as such, anybody could get up and join in and instruments would be swapped around; that there'd be no distance between the audience and the band; that we were nobody special." Founding member Mark White had never played bass before and at their first jam used a door key to pick the strings. Lycett played a battered secondhand guitar that cost ten pounds. Exuberantly mixing informality with ineptitude, early Mekons gigs were "complete art noise chaos," recalls Burnham. "They opened for Gang of Four at our second show ever and they had a sofa onstage representing a spaceship. It had the word 'spaceship' painted on it. It was genius and hilarious." Lyrics, read off a piece of paper, devolved into improvised gabble. Friends wandered on and offstage. At another gig, the set disintegrated because the set list had been inadvertently written out in a completely different order for every band member.

Taking the punk ideal of "anyone can do it" even more seriously than Swell Maps, the Mekons ought to have gone nowhere. Amazingly, they had a record deal by their second show. They were supporting Scottish pop-punk outfit the Rezillos at the F-Club, Leeds's leading New Wave club. Bob Last was in the audience and decided that the Mekons would be the perfect group to kick-start his still productless Fast Product. Slightly put out at being so swiftly overtaken by their seemingly less serious brethren, Gang of Four were mollified when they soon got signed to Fast Product, too.

A stumbling juggernaut of crude guitar and caveman drums, "Never Been in a Riot," the Mekons' debut, was a sonic argument in support of the proposition that rock, in the words of *Melody Maker's* Mary Harron, "is the only form of music which can actually be done *better* by people who can't play their instruments than by people who can." Not everybody bought the argument initially. Rough Trade *literally* didn't buy it, refusing to take any copies of the single, saying it was just too incompetent. "Shortly thereafter, though, it was made Single of the Week in *NME*," recalls Last. "And *everybody* wanted it, including Rough Trade."

NME's seal of approval was all the more significant because it came courtesy of the paper's resident punk rocker Tony Parsons, who took the lyrics of "Never Been in a Riot" as an inspired lampoon of the Clash's street-fighting-man posturing ("White Riot," the allusion to "sten guns in Knightsbridge" in "1977," etc.). According to Greenhalgh, the song is closer to an admission of vulnerability. "That you might be in a riot and be scared. Being open about that kind of weakness rather than trying to put on a front." This was all part of the Mekons' self-effacing and humanizing project—a refusal to be larger

than life. Later in 1978, Tony Parsons interviewed the group as part of an *NME* special feature on the Leeds scene. In keeping with their ideals, the Mekons insisted on “no photographs, no surnames. We don’t want to push ourselves as *individual personalities!*” Says Greenhalgh, “We didn’t want to be photographed for *NME*, so we made this puppet creature and put a guitar around it.” Photographer Steve Dixon sneaked a snapshot of them anyway.

While the Mekons upturned both traditional rock heroics and its punk successor (the Clash’s guitarist-as-guerrilla shtick), Gang of Four gradually acquired a reputation as a sort of new, improved Clash, agit-punk with a proper grounding in theory. “Damaged Goods,” the title track of their debut EP, showed the group had done its Marxist homework and knew about things like “commodity fetishism” and “reification.” “Damaged Goods” uses the language of commerce and industry as a prism offering disconcerting insights into affairs of the heart. With grim wit, the song represents a breakup in terms of refunds and emotional costs: “Open the till/Give me the change you said would do me good...you said you’re cheap but you’re too much.”

The EP’s other standout track, “Love Like Anthrax,” was an even more heartlessly cold dissection of romance. The music was estrangement enough by itself. “There’s this bizarre, totally robotic drumbeat matched with a weird two-bar-loop bassline, so that the emphasis in both drums and bass falls entirely in the unexpected place,” explains Gill. “And then my guitar comes in with random free-form noise.” In 1978, feedback hadn’t been heard in rock for a long while. Gill’s howling cacophony was nothing like Hendrix’s controlled yet orgiastic use of feedback to smear melody lines, or Velvet Underground’s tidal waves of white noise. In rock’s Romantic tradition, feedback typically signified the engulfingly oceanic, a swoony rush of Dionysian oblivion. In Gill’s hand, it just sounded like migraine, which totally suited “Anthrax”’s theme of love as a debilitating brain fever, something any rational person would avoid like the plague. In the lyrics, King bemoans feeling like “a beetle on its back.” He’s paralyzed and literally drained, his lovesick thoughts trickling “like piss” down the gutter.

“Love Like Anthrax” is constructed as a sort of Brechtian stereophonic duet. King wails the stricken lover’s lament from one speaker; Gill recites dry-as-dust details about the recording process from the other. Burnham once compared “Anthrax” to the split-screen techniques in Godard’s 1975 movie *Numero Deux*, where everyday life in a working-class French family is juxtaposed with more dissonant, private scenes of the same characters. Gill and King ran Leeds University’s student film society, so they’d have been familiar with Godard’s work: the deliberately exposed means of production (like the

clapper board that flashes into view every so often in *La Chinoise*); the disjointedness (continuity lapses, incorrect eye line matches, jump cuts, lack of congruence between images and sound); characters breaking the fourth wall to address the audience; and all the other stylistic tics designed to make the viewer conscious of film as artifact and contrivance. Gang of Four and Godard both maintained a wary and vigilant stance toward the seductions of their chosen art forms. Godard described cinema as “the most beautiful fraud in the world,” and saw his films as a form of active criticism. A veteran contributor to the journal *Cahiers Du Cinema*, he wrote, “I’m still as much of a critic as I ever was. The only difference is that instead of writing criticism, I now film it.” Both Godard and Gang of Four inevitably faced similar accusations from traditionalists: too much concept and theory, not enough emotion, sensuousness, warmth.

Behind the director-provocateur and the agit-funk group lay a common source, Bertolt Brecht’s antinaturalistic, unabashedly didactic theater. What Brecht called “epic theater” confronted the spectator with an arbitrary and absurd reality. Instead of feeling that the protagonist’s woes were in accord with the ordained nature of reality (and therefore, as in tragedy, somehow noble), you were meant to feel that “the sufferings of [the protagonist] appall me, because they are unnecessary.” Brecht’s “alienation effects” dislocated the viewer from his “natural responses,” cutting through so-called realism to offer a glimpse of the deep structures that organize our lives. Brecht’s imperative—“what is ‘natural’ must have the force of what is startling”—dovetailed with another Marxist thinker, Antonio Gramsci, whose work was being rediscovered in the 1970s. In his view, the ruling class exerted “hegemony” by making the ways of the world seem like simple “common sense.” Radical critique, argued Gramsci, should unmask every obvious-seeming piece of common sense as man-made, a “truth” built to serve somebody’s interest.

A Brecht fan to the point of having Bertolt’s picture on the wall of his Edinburgh flat, Bob Last incorporated alienation effects into the artwork of *Damaged Goods*. “The group sent me a letter that was very precise about what they wanted on the cover,” he says. Enclosed was a newspaper clip with a photograph of a female matador and a bull, along with a caption of dialogue. The matador explains, “You know, we’re both in the entertainment business, we have to give the audience what they want. I don’t like to do this but I earn double the amount I’d get if I were in a 9 to 5 job.” The bull grumbles in response, “I think that at some point we have to take responsibility for our actions.” In the end, Last ignored the Gang’s wishes and designed a different cover, but reproduced the letter and the untidily snipped-out newspaper clipping on the back sleeve. “This didn’t exactly

mollify the group,” recalls Last. “But I’m sure they recognized that, to the extent they were interested in deconstruction, this was an unassailable gesture!”

Released in the autumn of 1978, *Damaged Goods* was hailed as a breakthrough. Here was a group that had found a totally new way of negotiating the thorny danger zone of politics in rock. Abrasive but accessible, Gang of Four avoided both Tom Robinson–style preachy protest and the forbidding didacticism of avant-gardists like Henry Cow. The form was as radical as the content, and yet it *rocked*. You could even dance to it.

After *Damaged Goods*, Gang of Four, encouraged by Last, made a then controversial decision to abandon the independent sector and sign to a major label. The idea of reaching the largest number of people possible made sense given the group’s propagandizing impulse. It also chimed with one of the group’s major subjects, entertainment. It was much more provocative to intensify the implicit contradictions by operating right at the heart of the rock leisure industry. Whereas other politicized bands agonized over being connected to multinational conglomerates, Andy Gill and his comrades felt that the Pop Group’s and the Slits’ dream of “escaping Babylon was bollocks hand-wringing, as much as we loved both those groups. The point for us was *not* to be ‘pure.’ Gang of Four songs were so often about the inability to have ‘clean hands.’ It just wouldn’t be on our agenda to be on a truly independent label, as if such a thing could even exist.” Several majors courted them, but EMI emerged as a favorite, precisely for its sheer monolithic size and bland image. Along with its globe-spanning muscle, EMI offered them a surprising degree of creative control. According to Gill, it was almost a production-and-licensing deal, with Gang of Four handing over the finished album tapes, which they produced themselves. The group also designed their own album sleeves, posters, press ads, and badges.

The Mekons’ second single for Fast Product, the indie smash “Where Were You?” was released toward the end of 1978 and quickly sold out its 27,500-copy first pressing. But the Mekons, too, were eventually persuaded to step up to the major leagues and sign with Virgin. “Bob Last convinced us there was nothing morally superior about signing to an indie label,” says Greenhalgh. Ambushed by success, the Mekons had inadvertently ended up with a career on their hands, arriving at a level of gigging activity that needed the sort of funding only a major could provide. The group’s rise peaked in March 1979, when they were featured on the bill of what was semijokingly dubbed the gig of the century by the music papers, a showcase at London’s Lyceum venue of “new music” that included Gang of Four and another Fast Product band, the Human League, along with the

Fall and Stiff Little Fingers. But not long after this show the Mekons' attempt at infiltrating the mainstream went awry.

The big time didn't really suit a group based around amateurish charm. All the life was sucked out of the Mekons' debut LP, *The Quality of Mercy Is Not Strnen*, by its being recorded in Virgin's topflight studio, the Manor. By the end of 1979, the group seemed hopelessly confused, denying in interviews that they'd ever made a virtue out of ineptitude ("we were always desperately trying to play well," Greenhalgh told *Melody Maker*). They'd gradually reneged on their early impractical principles (no photographs, no personality cult), yet were too self-effacing to really seize the possibilities of fame. "When we first started, our only reason for existing was that we'd made this appalling record that should never have been a record but was," Greenhalgh said. "And we were a group that never should have been a group but were. Now we're at the stage where those sort of reasons for existing are irrelevant. So it's a question of what actually are we?" It would be five years before the Mekons discovered a new and brilliant purpose for themselves, after a painful, fitful process of self-reinvention.

While the Mekons struggled to promote *Quality of Mercy*, Gang of Four released their debut major-label single, "At Home He Feels Like a Tourist." The lyrics obliquely critiqued leisure and entertainment as surrogates for real satisfaction and stimulation. Lyrically opaque, the song was sonically Gang of Four's starkest and most compelling yet. Gill's backfiring guitar slashed across the robotic/hypnotic mesh of drums and bass, which sounded like "perverted disco," in Jon King's words. But a verse in "Tourist" *about* discotheques caused the group's first setback. Boosted by frequent evening play on Radio One, the single cracked the lower end of the U.K. Top 75, at which point the group was invited to appear on *Top of the Pops*, a golden opportunity to penetrate the heart of mass culture. Exposure to an audience of ten million would almost certainly propel the single into the Top 30 the next week. But on the day of the show, the producers objected to the line "the rubbers you hide in your top left pocket," part of a verse about discos making their profits through selling sex, or the promise of it. Gang of Four offered to change the coarse slang term for condoms to the more neutral and ambiguous "packets." *Top of the Pops* insisted the word be changed to "rubbish," because "packets" sounded too obviously altered and they didn't want anyone to know there'd been censorship. After agonizing debate, with minutes to go before recording was due to start, Gang of Four refused.

"At Home He Feels Like a Tourist" continued its rise anyway, and *TOTP* extended the invitation again, but on the same terms. "We stuck to our guns," says Burnham. "We were all as one on that decision, and

it felt great. But in retrospect, walking off *Top of the Pops* essentially killed our career.” Burnham is convinced that the single would have shot into the Top 30 after the group’s dynamic performance. “Plus we would not have lost the support of a large number of people at EMI like we did. The exasperation on the promotions man’s face when we announced we wouldn’t do *Top of the Pops*!”

Entertainment!, the debut album, did reasonably well critically and sales-wise, but by Gang of Four’s own standards it was an intervention that had fallen short, given their ambition to infiltrate the mainstream. Taken as an art object in itself (and considering its long-term impact), *Entertainment!* was anything but a failure. One of postpunk’s defining masterworks, every aspect of the record (lyrics, music, artwork—the famous cover image of the fooled Indian shaking hands with the cowboy eager to exploit him) is perfectly aligned. The sheer sound of the record—sober, flat, at once in-your-face and remote—stood out. *Entertainment!* broke with rock-recording conventions by being extremely “dry,” in the technical sound-engineering sense of “no reverb, drums that didn’t ring,” says Burnham. There was no attempt to capture what the group sounded like live, no gesture toward simulating music being played in a real acoustic space. “In retrospect, it would have been nice to hear those songs recorded in a way that was truer to how we sounded onstage,” says Burnham. But this was part of *Entertainment!*’s achievement, its alienation effect. This was obviously a studio artifact, a cold-blooded construction.

Entertainment! was dry in the emotional sense too, using the scalpel of Marxist analysis to dissect the mystifications of love, “capitalist democracy,” and rock itself. The songs depicted relationships and situations in a diagrammatic fashion. Even though Jon King often sang in the first person, there was an element of depersonalization, a sense of the song’s human actors being buffeted by impersonal social forces. As Greil Marcus, an early champion of the group, suggested, the characters in their songs often seem to be on the brink of seeing through “false consciousness” and apprehending the structural realities that govern their existence, but they never quite make it. And so “Contract,” one of *Entertainment!*’s most unnerving songs, recasts matrimony in terms of a business arrangement, “a contract in our mutual interest.” It shifts from the concrete specifics of a malfunctioning partnership—disagreements, disappointing sex—to the scripted nature of the unhappily married couple’s conflict: “These social dreams/ Put in practice in the bedroom/ Is this so private?/ Our struggle in the bedroom.” Recoiling from consumerism’s “coercion of the senses,” “Natural’s Not in It” similarly insists there’s “no escape from society.” “Not Great Men” challenges history written from the standpoint of powerful leaders like kings and generals while ignoring

the little people who build palaces and fight wars. In *Sounds*, Garry Bushell sourced the song in Brecht's famous poem "A Worker Reads History," which concludes with the lines "Every page a victory/Who cooked the feast for the victors?/Every ten years a great man/Who paid the bill?"

Then and now, political songwriting generally posits the singer and the audience as exempt from the evils being castigated. Whether it's finger-pointing protest or wry social comment, the problem is *over there*. Rather than cozily dividing the world into a righteous "us" versus a corrupt "them," Gang of Four's songs implicated listeners (and themselves) in the very processes being critiqued. But that didn't mean there weren't sides worth taking or enemies worth fighting. In spring 1979, Gang of Four participated in Rock Against Racism's monthlong Militant Entertainment Tour, a series of gigs across the country involving some thirty bands in rotating lineups. The main target of this immense campaign was the National Front, which was running candidates in every single parliamentary seat in the impending May 1979 general election, thus earning the right to a certain number of free political broadcasts on national television. The backdrop was the seemingly inevitable downfall of Callaghan's Labour government and its replacement by the Conservatives under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher.

In a January 1978 TV interview, Thatcher had expressed concerns about immigration, using the metaphor of "swamping" to describe the impact of multiculturalism on the British "character" and way of life. In response to a question about the National Front, she said that while most people didn't agree with the organization's stance on immigration and repatriation, "at least it's talking about some of the problems." In contrast, David Widgery, a key spokesperson for Rock Against Racism and the Anti Nazi League, imagined a multicolored coalition of workers and minorities uniting to build a hybrid British culture. "She thinks we're being 'swamped' by it," he told *NME*, "but I want it to swamp her."

Leeds was on the front line of this culture war. In part because of the large student population, it was one of the first cities in Britain to found a local branch of Rock Against Racism. But some of its working-class youth felt the pull of extremist right-wing groups. The National Front launched what it called the Punk Front in Leeds, attempting to recruit members at the F-Club. Leeds was also the birthplace of Rock Against Communism, involving local right-wing punk bands like the Dentists, whose songs included "Kill the Reds," "Master Race," and "White Power." Fascist thugs attacked racial minorities, homosexuals, and students who looked obviously left-wing, on one occasion even invading the Fenton. "It was like a Wild West saloon, chairs flying

everywhere, people getting hit, glasses getting smashed,” recalls Andy Gill. Gangs of skins would come marauding around the university campus. “There’d be the occasional pitched battle—people lobbing stuff at each other.”

Fascist skinheads also regularly materialized at gigs by Gang of Four, the Mekons, and their allies, starting fights in the audience, throwing abuse and projectiles at the bands. Delta 5’s lineup—two guys and three women, dressed in the unisex feminist style of the day—seemed to particularly offend the goon squad. Bassist Ros Allen was denounced as a “communist witch” at one gig. The girls gave as good as they got, though. At another show, Bethan Peters—Delta 5’s other bassist—grabbed a *Sieg Heiling* youth and slammed his head against the stage.

Although the movement against “political correctness” hadn’t quite blossomed, Malcolm Bradbury’s *The History Man*, his 1975 novel satirizing British academia, helped fuel the increasingly widespread view of higher education as a hotbed of leftist troublemakers. As far as conservative fogies were concerned, theory mongers were running rampant over traditional liberal shibboleths of objectivity and balance, truth and beauty, with their repugnant rabble of isms (racism, sexism, classism, ageism, etc.). Indeed, in the seventies political culture that shaped Gang of Four, the Mekons, and Delta 5, people would use expressions like “ideologically sound” without the slightest whiff of irony. “When I write I try so hard to make sure the words are sound, that there’s nothing sexist in them,” the Mekons’ Mark White told *Sounds* earnestly. “So a lot of the early songs were written wimpy on purpose.”

The women in Delta 5, in contrast, often wrote from a standpoint of defiance, aloofness, self-assertiveness, and unapproachable autonomy. “Mind Your Own Business,” their debut single, was hilariously coldhearted and standoffish, resolutely barring entrance to someone craving intimacy and involvement. “Can I interfere in your crisis?/No! Mind your own business!” “You,” the second single, was funnier still, a series of accusations and recriminations. “Who left me behind at the baker’s?/YOU, YOU, YOU, YOU!/Who likes sex only on Sundays?/YOU, YOU, YOU, YOU!” Like Gang of Four, Delta 5 built distancing effects into the songs. As hostile as these songs about soured relationships were, they didn’t exactly feel confessional, something accentuated by the lack of gender specificity in the lyrics and the fact that many of the vocals were doubled. Delta 5 firmly believed in the personal-is-political approach. “Personal relationships are like a microcosm of the whole world and in that way we are commenting on things in general,” Bethan Peters argued.

Genealogically, Delta 5 formed as an offshoot of the Mekons. Ros

Allen had been the latter's original bassist, and Bethan Peters and Julz Sale were both "Mekons girlfriends." Mekons drummer Jon Langford did the great artwork for the first two Delta 5 singles. Even the name Delta 5 came from the Mekons, via the Mekong Delta. But sonically Delta 5 were closer to Gang of Four's punk funk, with funk rather narrowly understood as clipped, scratchy rhythm guitar and hard-driving bass riffs that took on the melodic role. Delta 5 went one better than Gang of Four and featured *two* bass guitars—Peters's more trebly, Allen's a low growl.

Another hard-riffing agit-funk band with a mixed-gender lineup and songs that scrutinized sexuality with an unforgiving eye was the Au Pairs. "They were in a different city, Birmingham, but they were definitely part of our thing," says Hugo Burnham. "We played a lot of gigs with the Au Pairs, they came on a Gang of Four tour." Their most famous song, "Come Again," depicts an egalitarian couple who is trying to achieve orgasmic parity. Sung as a duet, it's a microdrama in which Paul Foad plays the eager-to-please man earnestly frigging his long-suffering partner, Lesley Woods. "Is your finger aching?/I can feel you hesitating," she wonders, as the likelihood of orgasm fades to zero. By the end, despite everyone's progressive intentions, she's simply discovered "a new way to fake."

"Everything is political, everything you do in life, the way you relate to people around you is political," Woods declared. Feminism's focus on attitudes, language, the thousands of micropolitical interactions that make up day-to-day behavior, meant that being "aware" involved being constantly *self-aware*. "There was definitely a politicization element to relationships," recalls Burnham. "The women amongst our social circle were much healthier in terms of the male-female power dynamic. We were all into reexamining how you conducted your life, the things you took for granted. On our second tour of America, I wore an ERA T-shirt in support of the Equal Rights Amendment. At the same time, though, it didn't mean we didn't try to get laid at every opportunity. There was *nothing* puritanical about Gang of Four! There was a very hedonistic attitude with alcohol, but it wasn't in a way that was destructive of other people's dignity or space. The only dignity that suffered was our own!"

Gang of Four certainly liked a beer or two, or twenty. Hard drinkers who enjoyed nothing more than a chance to flex their powers of reason in a close, discursive combat, the Gang of Four, for all their antisexist rhetoric, were a rather masculine bunch, and repressed in ways that were both typically English and characteristic of the hard Marxist Left, which tended to fetishize rationality while disdaining the emotional. Gill in particular was your classic bottle-it-all-up Brit. "Of all the people I worked with, he was the only one I never saw cry,"

says Burnham. “Unless he was so fucking drunk he’d hurt himself!” There were occasional glimpses of fragility in Gang of Four’s music, such as the restless desolation of “Glass” and the supine despondency of “Paralysed.” The spoken lyric to “Paralysed” (the opening track on Gang of Four’s second album, *Solid Gold*) was taken by most reviewers as the lament of a man laid low by being laid off. According to Gill, who wrote and recited it, it’s actually much closer to the blues in the original sense.

Mostly, though, Gang of Four extolled cold, unyielding reason. Rerecorded for *Entertainment!*, “Love Like Anthrax” now featured a Gill dissertation on the love song as a staple of pop music issuing from one speaker, while the romance-ravaged King wailed out of the other. Gill ponders why pop groups sing about love constantly, expresses doubt that everyone is capable of this allegedly universal emotion, and concludes, “I don’t think we’re saying there’s anything wrong with love, we just don’t think that what goes on between two people should be shrouded in mystery.” The polemic is spot-on. Propagated by Hollywood and popular song, the myth of romantic love gradually replaced religion as the opiate of the people in the twentieth century. But the aridity of the world that Gang of Four implicitly proposes—something you can *taste* in the gruff neutrality of Gill’s classless voice—would make most people run back to the arms of that most cherished and consoling illusion, love as seemingly achievable heaven on Earth.

The trouble with demystification is that it kind of takes the mystery out of everything. It strips the world of superstition and sentimentality, but also eliminates intuition and other nonrational forms of perception and awareness. The “unisex” brand of feminism in vogue on the Leeds scene meant that women became tough minded, assertive, and “dry.” The men, however, didn’t have to get any more moist or androgynous. Jon King rejected the notion that men needed to develop their feminine emotional side. “That sort of resort to the emotions is part of the oppression,” he argued. “If all the time you react to things on an emotional level, you’ll never get anywhere.”

Perhaps there was a sense deep down in which Gang of Four feared music itself—its seductive power and primal energy, its invitation to cast logic aside and surrender to mindless bliss—and all the distancing devices they used were self-protective as much as anything else, making two selves: one involved, “inside” the music, the other detached, standing slightly outside. Gill explains how Gang of Four loved the seventies hard-rock band Free “because it was very rhythmic and stripped-down. But then you had Paul Rodgers singing about his car and his woman. So you had to have a bit of suspended belief, you could love Free and yet be completely aware of the idiocy

of the lyrics. You could say Free influenced Gang of Four, but our approach was to take *that bit* but leave *that other ridiculous bit* out, or take that cliché and turn it inside out.” In postpunk terms, this approach was equivalent to a sort of cock-blocked rock, hard but not macho. Onstage the group avoided the stereotypical phallic rock ’n’ roll poses, but as Burnham concedes, “We did have a very quasi-violent stage presence, all the running around and bashing into each other that Jon, Andy, and Dave did. Theatrically, it was very intense, flirting with a violent undertone.” And because Gang of Four’s music “brought together the groove of black music with the hardness of guitar rock,” as Gill puts it, some journalists critiqued it as just a finked-up version of heavy metal.

The band’s rampaging, balls-out rock side got captured on *Solid Gold*, which was released in early 1981. Sporadically exciting, the album’s live-sounding production was more conventional than *Entertainment!*’s dessicated starkness. Lyrically, Gill and King seemed to have lost their touch. The songs veered from crude, third-person typology (the protofascist caricatures of “Outside the Trains Don’t Run on Time” and “He’d Send in the Army”) to clumsy satire (the anti-American “Cheeseburger”). The better songs like “Paralysed” and “What We All Want” struck a note of sadness that tapped into the apprehensive mood that pervaded the start of the eighties, as the implications of the Thatcher and Reagan victories began to sink in.

Deemed a disappointment and an irrelevance in the U.K., where pop trends had moved on already, *Solid Gold* is considered just one notch below *Entertainment!*’s classic stature in America. In 1980, Gang of Four virtually disappeared from the British scene, touring the United States twice. “Countless times in the States, people would come up to me after gigs and say, ‘I’d read the *NME* interviews and I thought you’d be really boring,’” laughs Burnham. “They were taken aback because we fucking *rocked*, rather than standing around in long macs looking miserable like your typical postpunk band. That’s why we did so well in the U.S. The propensity to *rock out* is more ingrained in the young American psyche than in Europe. It’s the same reason the Clash were so successful in America. And we were the Clash without the cowboy outfits.”

Gang of Four inspired many groups in the U.K. to embrace hard funk as the “sonically correct” format for politically conscious postpunk music, but their greatest long-term legacy lay in America. Over the last twenty-five years, countless bands—Pylon, the B-52s, Romeo Void, Red Hot Chili Peppers (who enlisted Gill to produce their debut album), the Minutemen, Fugazi, Big Black, Helmet, Rage Against the Machine, Girls Against Boys, the Rapture, and many more—have seized on aspects of the Gang of Four style, finding inspiration

in the possibility the Leeds group opened up for a new form of rock that's aggressive and violent without being oppressively macho. But none have rivaled the stunning originality of the Gang's total sound and vision.

THE INDUSTRIAL GROTESQUERIE OF PERE UBU AND DEVO

IN JULY 1978, Stiff Records and *Sounds* magazine jointly announced a competition to win a trip to Akron, Ohio. The highlight of a weekend spent in the “rubber capital of the world” was a guided tour of the Firestone Tire Company. The runner-up would win some Firestone tires and Stiff’s *Akron* compilation, a sampler of local New Wave talent with a scratch ‘n’ sniff sleeve—the odor, naturally, being rubber.

It’s hard to believe now, but there was a brief period, about eighteen months, during which Akron and Cleveland, its neighbor forty miles north, were considered the most exciting cities on Earth when it came to rock music. Indeed, when Gang of Four and the Mekons first started to get attention, *NME* hyped Leeds as “this week’s Akron.” Cleveland, declining capital of the steel industry, and Akron, undistinguished and largely unknown outside of the United States, both seemed *exotic*, albeit in a harsh, appropriately postpunk way. “Marvel at the desecration of the earth’s crust,” exhorted Stiff’s music paper ads, hailing Akron as the place “where the American dream ends.” Radar Records enticed music fans to buy Pere Ubu’s *Datapanik in the Year Zero* using pictures of poisoned fish in the pollutant-rich Cuyahoga River and the slogan “The beauty of Cleveland pressed into vinyl.” Journalists decreed the crud-choked Cuyahoga to be a new Mersey running through the two cities surely destined to be as important to late ’70s rock as Liverpool was in the sixties. The only catch was that each city was home to just one truly great band. Akron had Devo and Cleveland had Pere Ubu, but in the hype storm, lesser local lights like Tin Huey, the Bizarros, and Rubber City Rebels benefited in the form of media coverage and record deals.

The concept of industrial music usually gets attributed to Throbbing Gristle, but the Ohio bands built that buzzword, too. In 1977, as TG’s Death Factory began churning out grisly product, Pere Ubu talked about their music as “industrial folk,” while Devo described themselves as an “eighties industrial band.” Synonymous with companies such as U.S. Steel, Cleveland had been the engine room of America’s industrial revolution. But after the steel-hungry Second World War, Cleveland began to ail. “The mills didn’t modernize themselves after the war, so they weren’t as cost-efficient as foreign rivals,” says Scott Krauss, Pere Ubu’s drummer. The seventies oil crunch hit Cleveland, Akron, and the other industrial towns of northeast Ohio hard. Akron’s rubber and Cleveland’s steel had fed Michigan’s automobile industry, but as fuel prices soared, people turned to Japanese-made cars that didn’t guzzle gas.

There's something special about cities that were once prosperous. The residues of wealth and pride make a rich loam in which bohemia can grow. Former affluence bequeaths a material legacy in the form of handsomely endowed colleges, art schools, museums, and galleries. Artists and slackers live cheaply in once grand houses that have grown shabby and low-rent, while derelict warehouses and empty factories can be easily repurposed as rehearsal or performance spaces. A husk from Cleveland's heyday provided Ubu with their first regular opportunity to play live. A scuzzy biker's bar known as the Pirate's Cove occupied what had once been John D. Rockefeller's first warehouse. Pirate's Cove was in the heavily industrialized riverside zone known as the Flats, an area that Ubu waxed lyrical about in their first interviews, describing ore-loaded barges floating down the Cuyahoga, steel foundries pounding nonstop night and day, the glare from blast furnaces bruising the night in hues of green and purple, and belching smokestacks and lattices of piping silhouetted against the sky. "We thought it was magnificent...like going to an art museum or something," singer David Thomas recollected some twenty years later.

It seems somehow symbolic that Pere Ubu owed their existence partly to inherited wealth. Synth player Allen Ravenstine used trust fund money to buy an entire apartment building called the Plaza in downtown Cleveland, and rented its thirty-six rooms out cheaply to artistically minded friends, including every member of Ubu: guitarist Tom Herman, bassist Tony Maimone, the group's original cofounder Peter Laughner, drummer Krauss, and singer Thomas. An imposing Gothic building, the Plaza was just one block south of Euclid Avenue, known in the nineteenth century as Millionaire's Row because the steel barons built houses for their mistresses there. Now fittingly Cleveland's red-light district, the neighborhood wasn't somewhere most people would willingly reside, but Ubu loved its ghost town ambience and saw themselves as urban pioneers reclaiming the deindustrialized wilderness.

Another by-product of Ravenstine's inherited fortune was his expensive EML 200 synth, and the fact that he could take two years off to learn to play it. Living in a house out in the country, Ravenstine clocked in for eight hours of practice a day, just as if it were a job. The EML resembled an "old-fashioned telephone operator switchboard, full of jacks to plug in," recalls Krauss. Because it had a touch-tone dial instead of a keyboard, Ravenstine immediately bypassed the prog-rock style of synth playing—twirling arpeggios and Bach-like folderol—and got right into the messy business of molding raw sound. "He'd make a noise like a five-pound can with a whole bunch of bumblebees inside," says Krauss. "Then he'd change the sine wave and it'd sound like a beach with a whole bunch of people on it. Ten seconds later, it'd flip

to a freight car noise. The imagination-activating level was absolutely amazing.”

Like Ravenstine’s smeary blurts of electronic abstraction, David Thomas’s high-pitched bleat immediately marked Ubu as not your average bar band. Whinnying like some peculiar asexual monster, Thomas sounded like Captain Beefheart if his balls had never dropped. Unlike Beefheart, there was no blues in Thomas’s throat. “I had all sorts of rules I would follow because I was obsessed with not ripping off black music,” he says. “So I had rules where I would refuse to bend a note or extend a syllable past one beat.” Often he favored a kind of dyslexic vocalese. “I was totally obsessed with the abstract. That’s why early on you can’t hear anything I’m singing.”

If Thomas and Ravenstine were the quirk-out elements in Ubu’s sound, drummer Krauss and bassist Maimone created a solid but inventive foundation for the freaky stuff, resulting in a sound the band punningly described as “avant-garage.” Guitarist Tom Herman, alternating between heavy riffing and sculpted arabesques of twisted metal, shifted around somewhere between the avant and the garage. “David at one point drew a line across the stage and said, ‘This is the intellectual side of the band and that is the tank side’—‘tank’ as in warfare,” recalls Krauss. The rhythm section was designated the muscle, Ravenstine and Thomas the scrambled brainiacs, but Herman stood dead center, in no-man’s-land.

In the 1970s, Cleveland prided itself as being the first musically sophisticated city west of New York. According to Thomas, the city was “a real hothouse” of connoisseur cliques defining themselves through unusual taste. “Everybody in bands worked at record stores, and each store competed to have the most complete catalogs,” says Thomas. Besides ultrahip record shops like Drome, the city was blessed with one of the most progressive radio stations in America, WMMS. Its early seventies playlist reads like John Lydon’s Capital Radio show: Velvet Underground, Roxy Music, Soft Machine, even Peter Hammill’s band Van Der Graaf Generator.

In high school, Thomas’s tastes leaned toward the progressive. He was a massive Zappa fan (especially loving the tape-splicing studio collages of *Uncle Meat*) and regarded Beefheart’s *Trout Mask Replica* as a sacred document. The Stooges and the Velvet Underground were common ground across the Cleveland prepunk scene, as much for their attitude as for the music’s raw-power pummel. “We were two or three years posthippie, and those two or three years were pretty significant,” says Thomas. “We felt the hippies were pretty useless as any sort of social happening.” This was the generation that treated *Creem*’s Lester Bangs as a prophet, bought cutouts of LPs by the Velvet Underground and the Stooges, and closely studied Lenny Kaye’s *Nuggets*

anthology of sixties garage punk. In Cleveland, a whole protopunk scene developed based around these sounds. Like Ubu, though, the primitivism was studied—artistic gesture rather than lumpen impulse. In the early seventies, the Electric Eels wore safety pins, rattraps, and swastikas several years before the U.K. punks did, and called what they did “art terrorism.” The Styrenes’ performances even featured modern-dance and spoken-word elements.

Pere Ubu were arty as fuck, too. The name came from the monstrously cruel and scatologically crude despot in Alfred Jarry’s 1896 play *Ubu Roi*, in its day as scandalous as punk. Thomas explained the choice by saying, “I am in a lot of ways a grotesque character”—a reference to his corpulence and gnarly features—“and the band has a grotesque character. What we are is not pretty.” Thomas also admired Jarry’s “theatrical ideas and narrative devices,” such as his use of placards with words to set scenes as opposed to actual stage props and backdrops. Thomas developed similar alienation effects for Pere Ubu’s performances. Between-song patter might entail him thinking aloud, “Maybe I should get into some sort of audience rapport here?” At one point, Ubu’s live shows included “Reality Dub,” not a song but the simulation of a highly realistic-looking onstage accident.

Pere Ubu formed from the ashes of Thomas’s and Peter Laughner’s previous band Rocket from the Tombs, a less obviously art-warped proposition modeled on the raw power of the Stooges and MC5. Pere Ubu’s inaugural act was recording one of Rocket from the Tombs’ least characteristic tunes as a single. In Ubu’s rendition, “30 Seconds Over Tokyo”—an attempt to create the “total sonic environment” inside American bombers as they set off on their World War II mission to flatten Japan’s capital—became even more eccentric. It starts out like some loping, rhythmically sprained hybrid of Black Sabbath and reggae, speeds up a bit, dissolves into free-form splinters, flips back to avant-skank, lurches into a sort of doom-laden canter, then expires in a spasm of blistered feedback. Over six minutes long and almost prog in its structural strangeness, “30 Seconds” sounded about as far removed from the Ramones as, say, Yes did. Nonetheless, when the single—self-released on their own Hearthan label—began to circulate in early 1976, Pere Ubu found themselves lumped in with punk, then gathering momentum as journalists continued to hype the New York CBGB scene while monitoring the early stirrings of insurrection in London.

While they felt kinship with Television (the New York scene’s most psychedelic, least punkoid band) and other American eccentrics such as San Francisco’s the Residents that were coming through the door opened by punk, Pere Ubu were suspicious of the English scene. “Our

ambitions were considerably different from the Sex Pistols’,” sniffs Thomas, who regards that band’s brand of rebellion as puerile and destructive. The British, he believes, attached fashion and politics to something that was purely about music and artistic experimentation. Pere Ubu didn’t want to piss on rock music, they wanted to contribute, help it mature as an art form. “Our ambitions were to move it forward into ever more expressive fields, create something worthy of Faulkner and Melville, the true language of human consciousness,” Thomas says loftily. U.K. punk’s class-war rhetoric didn’t compute. Ubu were proudly bourgeois. “My father was a professor. I had an academic upbringing and certainly an academic path was indicated. This was the strength of our middle-class upbringing.” Although their music was dark and disorienting, Pere Ubu’s underlying spirit was constructive and positive. “Things are rough, things are weird, there’s no sense in ignoring that—which is why Ubu music isn’t all sweetness and light,” said Allen Ravenstine in one interview. “But you gotta *confront* the problems.”

Pere Ubu may have disdained the U.K.’s alternately politicized and nihilistic versions of punk, but it was British audiences who most fervently embraced Ubu’s music. The band’s next two singles, “Final Solution” and “Street Waves,” sold very well in the U.K., and Ubu’s first tour there in the spring of 1978 was greeted as the Second Coming. Emerging bands like Joy Division and Josef K were in the audiences, assimilating Herman’s fractured guitar, Maimone’s baleful bass-as-melody approach, and the ominous atmosphere of songs like “Real World” and “Chinese Radiation.”

Back in America, Mercury Records A&R man Cliff Burnstein had decided that Ubu would be the ideal signing to launch his new subsidiary label, Blank. Inspired by New Wave’s pared-down, no-frills aesthetic, Burnstein had developed a fresh approach to breaking bands: Record them cheap, so that sales of only 25,000 were required before label and band started earning. This was a break with the standard seventies major-label approach of extravagant recording and promotion budgets. These costs, recoupable against royalties, saddled the artists with debt, which left them vulnerable to corporate pressure to dilute their sound so that the company could get a swift return on its investment.

With outside interest in the Ohio scene reaching its peak, Blank released Ubu’s debut album, *The Modern Dance*, in March 1978, while in April U.K. label Radar Records put out *Datapanik in the Year Zero*, an EP that made widely available for the first time the best tracks from the three Hearthan singles. At the height of both their acclaim and artistic power, Pere Ubu sealed the impression of their creative floodgates having been hurled wide open by unleashing a second,

even more impressive album only seven months after the debut. *Dub Housing* got its evocative name not from any reggae leanings, but a stoned eye's view of Baltimore as the band drove through the city in their tour van. "In Baltimore they had these row houses, and somebody said, 'Oh, look, dub housing,'" says Krauss. The vistas echoed endlessly, paralleling the way that drum hits, guitar chords, and horn licks were turned into reverb trails by dub producers like King Tubby.

After their 1978 triumphs—two hugely acclaimed albums, two tours of the U.K. and one each in Europe and America—Pere Ubu reached a crossroads. Thomas recalls their big-time rock manager advising the group to effectively formulaize their sound, then beat the public over the head with it. Remake *Dub Housing* two or three more times, he said, and they'd be stars. "I said, 'What if we *can't* repeat it? What if we don't know what we did? What if we don't *want* to repeat it?'" recalls Thomas. The manager told Ubu they'd always get signed to deals and be able to release records, but they'd never transcend cult status. It was meant to be a dire warning, but, laughs Thomas, "our eyes lit up—"That sounds pretty good!"

The Modern Dance and *Dub Housing* both contained absurdist sound collages and exercises in pure Dada like "The Book Is on the Table" and "Thriller." These now became the blueprint for Ubu's third album, *New Picnic Time*. "Our problem is that we never wanted to repeat *Dub Housing*," Thomas once said. "That desire to never repeat became as much of a trap as trying to repeat formulas the way some bands do." Although he likes to argue that "all adventurous art is done by middle-class people" because they always have other career options and don't need to worry about making money, the corollary is that bourgeois bohemians don't possess that vital hunger to make it that drives people from less privileged backgrounds. "We were on the edge of being popular but we were fundamentally incapable of being popular," Thomas admits, "because we were fundamentally perverse."

"DEVO, IT'S LIKE THE TITANIC going down or something," Allen Ravenstine once said of Pere Ubu's Akron allies, who often played on the same bill as the Cleveland band early on. "The impression I've got from their songs and from talking with them is that they're really much more into making a mockery of everything, not really giving a damn."

Actually, Devo's cynicism was born of having once cared *too much*. Unlike Ubu, Devo had been hippies, of a sort. Gerald V. Casale and Mark Mothersbaugh, the group's conceptual core, were among the

antiwar students protesting at Ohio's Kent State University that fateful May morning in 1970 when the National Guard opened fire. Two of the four slaughtered students—Allison Krause and Jeffrey Miller—were friends of Casale's. "They were just really smart liberal kids, eighteen and nineteen, doing what we all did back then," he says. "They weren't crazy sociopaths." He recalls the dazed, slow-motion sensation when the guns started firing, "like being in a car accident," the blood streaming down the sidewalk, the eerie sound of moaning from the crowd, "like a kennel of hurt puppies." At first, "even the National Guard was frozen, freaked out. Then they marched us off campus and the university was shut down for three months."

May 4, 1970, is one of several contenders for the day the sixties died. "For me it was the turning point," says Casale bitterly. "Suddenly I saw it all clearly: All these kids with their idealism, it was very naïve." Participants in SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) such as Casale reached a crossroads. "After Kent, it seemed like you could either join a guerrilla group like the Weather Underground, actually try assassinating some of these evil people—the way *they* had murdered anybody in the sixties who'd tried to make a difference—or you could just make some kind of wacked-out creative Dada art response. Which is what Devo did."

Devo was born in the three months Kent was closed down. "Gerry would come 'round to my house and we started writing music," says Mothersbaugh. He'd first noticed Casale because of a prankster performance art stunt he'd pull during fine-arts faculty shows. "I'd be this character Gorge who wore an enema bag bandolero," says Casale. "My sidekick, Poot Man, dressed in black wrestling shorts and a black full-face mask like those Mexican wrestlers. He walked around like a monkey, knuckles trailing on the ground. The art was always bad, derivative stuff—endless mindless landscapes and still lifes. I'd point at a picture and go, 'Poot Man!' and he'd rub his ass on the artwork, or hold his nose like it stunk. Every time Poot Man took a pretend shit on the art, I'd reward him with milk, which he'd suck through the enema tube. People would be disgusted and move out of the way, and somebody would get security. After a few of these events, they'd be waiting for us." Says Mothersbaugh, "I saw him do the Poot Man thing, and I was like, 'Who's this guy?' Everybody hated Gerry so I *knew* I was going to like him." Casale, meanwhile, had already admiringly noted Mothersbaugh's artwork—decals of puking heads in profile.

For key members of a band that later defined New Wave music, Casale's and Mothersbaugh's roots were unpromising. "Mark was playing in a band that did Yes and ELP covers," chuckles Casale. "He had long hair down to his waist and a stack of keyboards." An

accomplished bassist, Casale had played in numerous blues bands and was steeped in everything from the original Delta blues to the electric Chicago sound. Prog and blues collided in a mutual passion for Captain Beefheart and the Magic Band. But everything that was earthy and primal about Beefheart's cubist R&B became deliberately sterile and stilted in Devo's hands. Their quest, says Casale, was to discover "what devolved music would sound like. We wanted to make outer-space caveman music."

Devo's other big inspiration was the glam grotesquerie of early Roxy Music. You can hear Bryan Ferry's android vibrato in Mothersbaugh's edge-of-hysteria bleat, while his approach to playing synth owed a lot to Eno. "I loved his asymmetric, atonal synth solos in Roxy. He brought a whole new way to think about the instrument, as opposed to Rick Wakeman and Keith Emerson, who just sounded like glorified organists. I used to write synth parts I could play with a fist instead of fingers. We were looking for sounds like V-2 rockets and mortar blasts, things that weren't on the settings when you bought a synth." Rather than a keyboard, Devo treated the synth as a noise generator. "The more technology you have, the more primitive you can be," Mothersbaugh told one interviewer. "You can express guttural sounds, bird noises, brain waves, blood flow."

In Devo's earliest days, the group experimented with machine rhythm. "Our first drummer was my youngest brother Jim, who left to be an inventor," says Mark. "He created a homemade electronic drum kit using acoustic drums with guitar pickups attached to their heads, which he'd feed into wah-wah pedals, fuzztones, and Echoplexes. It sounded really amazing, like a walking, broken-down robot." Ultimately, Devo found Alan Myers, "this incredible metronomic drummer," and the group started to explore disconcertingly disjointed time signatures like 7[⁄]8 and 11[⁄]8. "Those kind of timings make you feel rigid right away," says Casale.

In the early to midseventies, with punk barely a glimmer on the horizon, Devo defined themselves against the ruling American mainstream rock of the day, characterized by chugging feel-good boogie and slick, slack country rock. Inspired by Beefheart's jagged avant-blues, Devo broke up the flow with a deliberately ungroovy, stop-start approach that would eventually become a hallmark of New Wave. Just as Devo intellectually rejected all those "flabby leftover ideas from the sixties" (Casale) that had degenerated into self-absorbed, complacent hedonism by the early seventies, likewise their music's twitchy angularity was the antithesis of FM radio's soft rock. As expressed in the anthem "Be Stiff," Devo's proudly neurotic, uptight attitude was a revolt against the take-it-easy baby boomers. "We were anything but hippies—loose, natural," Casale recalled years

later.

Back in 1974, though, Devo's herky-jerky rhythms—midway between spasm and stricture—were as appealing to Akron audiences as a cup of cold puke. Because no one wanted to hear original music, Devo pretended to be a cover band to get gigs. "We'd say, 'Here's another one by Foghat' and then play one of our tunes like 'Mongoloid,'" chuckles Mothersbaugh. "Angry hippie factory workers charged the stage trying to stop us. Often we'd get paid to quit. Sometimes the police would be called."

Devo's first two singles, "Satisfaction" and "Jocko Homo"—self-released on the group's own Booji Boy label—were relatively torpid compared with their later frantic sound. This was partly because "Jocko Homo" and its B-side, "Mongoloid," were recorded in a garage with no heating during a freezing winter, with the band wearing gloves. After five years of languishing in obscurity in Akron, playing only a handful of gigs and funding the band through a series of grim jobs (Casale's résumé included projectionist in a porno theater, methadone clinic counselor, and graphic artist at a janitorial supply firm), the singles were Devo's calling card to the wider world. "No one will ever know the effort it took for us to get out of Akron," says Casale. "Driving down to Cincinnati with just enough cash to get two thousand copies pressed at Queen City Records. Mark and me sitting up endless nights gluing the covers that we'd printed together. Akron was like boot camp. We practiced day and night, and on weekends too—when other people were out getting loaded and getting laid—over and over until we got good."

It worked. Devo evolved into a tightly drilled package of sound and visuals, sharing as much with the shock rock theater of Alice Cooper and the Tubes as with the no-frills punk rockers. Whenever feasible, Devo gigs began with *The Beginning Was the End: The Truth About De-Evolution*, a ten-minute film directed by their friend Chuck Statler, whom they'd originally met in an experimental-art class at Kent State. Statler's minimovie generated the enduringly famous images of Devo: Mothersbaugh as mad professor in bow tie and white coat giving a student lecture on devolution, the rest of the band wearing plastic sunglasses and colored tights pulled tightly over their heads to squish their features, bank-robber-style. It was Statler who, in 1975, showed Devo a popular science magazine with a feature on laser discs, then on the verge of being introduced to the market. "We read that it was the same size as an LP but had moving pictures on it," says Mothersbaugh. "And we thought, 'Oh my God, that's what we want to do!'" Originally an aspiring film director more than a musician, Casale fantasized about making "an anticapitalist science-fiction movie" and always saw Devo as a visual entity, where "the

theatrics and the ideas and the staging were as important as the music.”

Champing at the bit to kick-start the videodisc revolution, Devo were impatient to get to the future. The seventies had been a write-off, merely the sixties sagging into decadence. Devo yearned to be the first band on the block making eighties music. Like Pere Ubu, they went beyond punk before punk even properly existed. Not just musically with their synths and industrial rhythms, but conceptually, too. They shared punk’s never-trust-a-hippie attitude, but, says Mothersbaugh, “We thought the punks never learned from the failure of the hippies. Rebellion always gets co-opted into another marketing device.” Selling out, using the system to spread the virus, seemed like the most insidious strategy for Devo, who saw themselves as a “postmodernist protest band.” Putting out the Booji Boy singles independently was just a step on the ladder, a way of attracting attention. The game plan was to join rock’s ruling class. “We figured we’d mimic the structure of those who get the greatest rewards out of the upside-down business and become a corporation,” Casale told *SoHo Weekly News*. “Most rock musicians, they’re no more than clerks or auto mechanics.”

So Devo gigs started with a bombastic synth jingle, the “Devo corporate anthem,” during which the group lined up solemnly to give a salute. Because “individuality and rebellion were obsolete,” Devo “dressed identical so you couldn’t tell who was who,” says Mothersbaugh. “We wanted to look like a machine or an army onstage. We felt that the real mindless uniform was rock’s blue jeans.” Instead, says Casale, the group “dressed like maintenance worker geeks,” wearing outfits he’d acquired during his stint at the janitorial supply company. They built up a mix-and-mismatch wardrobe that blended the regimental (Boy Scouts, servicemen, football teams) and the technocratic (hazardous-waste protection suits, rubber gloves). This they spiced with kitsch grotesquerie, including cheesy alien masks and peculiar plastic helmets styled to look like extremely bad hairpieces. Devo also developed a tautly choreographed repertoire of jerky stage moves inspired, says Casale, by seeing a Russian constructivist ballet. “And then we played this very precise music like James Brown turned into a robot. And it really pissed everybody off!”

Not everybody. In 1977 things got confusing as first Iggy Pop and David Bowie, and then Brian Eno and Robert Fripp, jostled to produce Devo’s debut. Thrilling to the sensations of dislocation and menace their music induced, Eno raved about Devo as “the best live show I have ever seen.” Neil Young, of all people, invited Devo to appear in his feature-length movie *Human Highway* as a squad of disgruntled and radioactively glowing nuclear-waste workers. Iggy Pop was so enamored that he wanted to record a whole album of Devo cover

songs as his next album. At the group's New York debut show in July 1977, Bowie came onstage to introduce the second set and announced, "This is the band of the future, I'm going to produce them in Tokyo this winter." Finally it was settled that the record would be produced by Eno at Conny Plank's studio, a converted farm twenty miles outside of Cologne, with Bowie contributing only on weekends because he was busy making the movie *Just a Gigolo*. "We didn't even have a record deal, but Eno said he'd pay for the flights, the studio costs, everything," says Mothersbaugh. "Eno was just certain we would get a record contract."

Sure enough, Warner Brothers, Island Records, and Bowie's production company, Bewlay Brothers, began competing for the group. Devo looked like the next gang of marketable monsters after the Sex Pistols. Then Virgin Records entered the fray. In early 1978, Richard Branson invited Mothersbaugh and Devo guitarist Bob Casale to fly to Jamaica. When the boys had gotten very stoned, he popped the question: What did they think about inviting Johnny Rotten, freshly fired from the Sex Pistols, to become Devo's singer? "He said, 'Johnny's in the next room, there's journalists from *NME* and *Melody Maker* here,'" recalls Mothersbaugh. "It's a perfect time to go down the beach, take some photos together, and announce he's joined Devo. What do you think?' I was too stoned to make the correct answer, which was 'Sure!' because we could have done the picture session, got the publicity, and then gone back to Akron and just said, 'No way, forget it.'"

Devo recorded their debut, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!*, in Germany while still embroiled in negotiations with labels (in the end, owing to a dispute over verbal agreements, Virgin and Warner Brothers *both* got the group, releasing Devo's records in the U.K. and America, respectively). Released in August 1978, *Q: Are We Not Men?* is a stone classic, but it does suffer slightly from falling between two extremes, neither capturing the full frenzy of Devo's live shows nor making a total foray into Eno's post-*Low* soundworld. "In retrospect, we were overly resistant to Eno's ideas," says Mothersbaugh. "He made up synth parts and really cool sounds for almost every song on the album, but we only used them on three or four songs...like the loop of monkey chanters that's on 'Jocko Homo.' I'd kind of like to hear what the album would have sounded like if we'd been more open to Eno's suggestions. But in those days we thought we knew everything."

You can still hear the Eno imprint. Tinted and textured, Casale's bass glistens wetly. "Shrivel Up" is dank with synth slime, giving the song an abject feel that fits the lyrics about decay and mortality. "Gut Feeling" takes garage punk's woman-done-me-wrong rage and gives it

a perverse twist: “You took your tongs of love and stripped away my garment.” “Uncontrollable Urge” makes rock’s “wild sexuality” seem as absurd and humiliating as an involuntary nervous tic. “Come Back Jonee” likewise turns Chuck Berry’s “Johnny B. Goode” inside out. In Devo’s tune, the heartbreaker bad boy “jumps into his Datsun,” the OPEC 1970s low-gas-consumption version of a real rock ‘n’ roll automobile like a T-Bird.

While the band toiled away at their debut, Devo mania escalated. Stiff Records licensed the original Booji Boy singles and rereleased them in quick succession. In April 1978, their cover of the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction”—which defiled the iconic sixties classic by reducing it to a desiccated theorem—was a hit in several European countries. Devo’s disco-punk version resembled, in Mothersbaugh’s words, “a stupid perpetual-motion machine clanking around the room.” But by the time *Q: Are We Not Men?* hit the record stores at the end of August, the hype and marketing overkill was beginning to raise hackles. The U.K. press shifted into premature backlash mode. What were Devo “about” anyway? Devo interviews were full of opaque pseudoscientific jargon and references to a menagerie of bizarre characters like Booji Boy (a grown man with a baby’s face), all of which skeptics found both contrived and silly. It was unclear if the group’s devolution theories represented a critique or a cynical celebration of cultural entropy, corporatized rock, and the recline and fall of the West.

Hatched by Mothersbaugh and Casale in the early days, devolution was a patchwork parody of religion and quack science woven together from motley sources, including the Second Law of Thermodynamics, sociobiology, genetics, the paranoid science fiction of William S. Burroughs and Philip K. Dick, and anthropology. The pair found an especially rich source in all those dodgy nineteenth-century eugenic theories involving notions of degeneration and the decline of civilization (often attributed to race mixing). Virgin’s press release for the album claimed the band “devolved from a long line of brain eating apes, some of which settled in north eastern Ohio.” Casale sampled this absurdist notion from a three-hundred-page treatise by a deranged Bavarian pseudoscientist. The tract argued that humans descended from cannibalistic monkeys whose diet of ape brain had resulted in bizarre mutations and the loss of their ability to live in nature. Devo also pillaged evangelical crank literature and pamphlets from millenarian Christian sects such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The album’s most physically galvanizing song, “Praying Hands,” was a stab at imagining a Christian fundamentalist dance craze. “Two of the biggest televangelists, Rex Humbard and the Reverend Ernest Ainsley, broadcast out of Akron,” says Mothersbaugh. “We saw how disgusting

and evil these people were, and so we took delight in turning their cosmology upside down.”

In Devo's music, a puritanical streak of revulsion jostled with an uncontrollable urge to revel in the mire. Talking of American pop culture, Casale describes being “raised in mindless electric filth.” Devo seemed to be starting from the same place—a sense of impotence and suffocation—as those great misanthropes of modernist literature, Louis-Ferdinand Celine and Wyndham Lewis, whose quest for purity in a tarnished world made them sympathetic to Nazism. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, abhorrence of capitalism led almost as many intellectuals to fascism as it did to communism. And some were quick to accuse Devo of being “fascist” themselves, most notably *Rolling Stone* magazine (who clearly recognized on some level that everything *they* stood for represented “the enemy” in Devo's worldview). Actually, it's more the case that Devo managed to include both abjection and the “fascist” response to it within their art simultaneously in their pantomime of disgust and discipline.

Properly attired, Devo stepped forth as “the clean-up squad” on a mission into the goo-goo muck zone of mainstream American culture. Interviews teemed with imagery of decay, obesity, excretion, flaccidity, infestation, tumors, putrefaction, and bulimia. “Progress” was a belief system that had gone “absolutely rancid.” One sequence during *The Truth About De-Evolution* saw the group sealed inside latex bags, writhing “like maggots, paramecium, fetal things.” But Devo's absolute favorite set of metaphors revolved around constipation, with Devo variously figuring as the laxative, the enema nozzle, the enema bag, or “the fluid in the bag.” “Gerry and I both had parents who'd read in Dr. Spock that it was a good idea to give your kids enemas once or twice a month,” says Mothersbaugh. “We lived in fear of the next enema, the warm soapy water. When we were in our twenties we finally said ‘Dad, that's enough!’”

This icky squeamishness contaminated Devo's sex songs, from their earliest efforts like “Buttered Beauties” (in which Mothersbaugh imagines female secretions smeared all over him like “glossy tallow”), to the chorus “I think I missed the hole” in the debut album's “Sloppy (I Saw My Baby Gettin’).” They loved pornography, whether it was Bataille's avant-garde version or *Hustler*'s mass-market hardcore. *Hustler* was the first newsstand porn mag to show gynecologically explicit photographs. “I wrote a song called ‘Penetration in the Centerfold’ about the first *Hustler* I ever saw,” says Mothersbaugh. “Porn is important to the lower economic levels, simply because you can't afford real sex.” What emerged from these impulses and inputs were songs that, beneath the quirky Dada surface, were often plain misogynistic in the most conventional sense. On the debut, “Gut

Feeling” segues straight into “Slap Your Mammy,” while “Triumph of the Will” on the second album, *Duty Now for the Future*, reads like a Nietzschean justification for rape: “It was a thing I had to do/It was a message from below...It is a thing females ask for/When they convey the opposite.” Much of *Duty* sounds like a robotic version of the Knack’s sexually pent-up “My Sharona,” all choppy New Wave guitar and frantically pelvic jack-off rhythms.

Unlike Pere Ubu, who happily remained a cult band, Devo’s mission to subvert from within would only work if the band was massively successful. With this in mind, they moved to Los Angeles, capital of the entertainment business, and with 1980’s *Freedom of Choice* made a record even more calculatedly commercial than the clinical-sounding *Duty*. The concept was “electro-R&B” but the results were more like a fusion of New Wave and Eurodisco. Everything was played by the band in the studio, but it *sounded* like it was programmed using sequencers. The electronic textures felt standard-issue, like the preset sounds you get on a synth. Still, *Freedom of Choice* achieved a New Wave–inflected dance rock sound that Billy Idol would later ride to stardom. And it gave Devo their own platinum album, spurred on by the Top 20 success of “Whip It.”

Written during the ailing twilight of the Carter presidency, “Whip It” offered Dale Carnegie–style advice to the embattled leader. “Come on, Jimmy, get your shit together,” laughs Mothersbaugh. By the time Warner Brothers allowed Devo to make a promo clip for the song, it was clear that Reagan was heading for a landslide victory. Devo made the video into a surreal commentary on America’s shift to the Right. The result was a video that twenty-five years later is not the least bit dated looking and is still a huge hoot. It was Devo’s one true moment of mass-cultural triumph.

Pitched somewhere between a John Ford Western and David Lynch’s *Eraserhead*, the genuinely creepy video for “Whip It” perfectly crystallizes Devo’s “freak show aesthetic.” As a bunch of Texan stud muffins and blonde bimbos gawk and giggle, Mothersbaugh wields a whip and one by one lashes away the garments of a strange Grace Jones–like amazon of a woman, whose legs start trembling in an indescribably abject way as she waits for the final whip crack to strip off her last shred of modesty. Meanwhile, the rest of Devo performs the song cooped inside a cattle pen—pasty-faced spud-boys wearing shorts that show off their scrawny knees and the famous “flowerpot hats.” “We were horrified by Reagan’s ascent,” says Casale. “So we were just making fun of myths of cowboys in the West. It was based on a magazine I’d found, one of those 1950s gentlemen’s magazines with soft-core nudies. It had an article about a dude ranch owned by an ex-stripper and her husband. As part of the entertainment, he’d

whip her clothes off in the corral for all the guests to watch.”

As the new decade proceeded, the original “eighties industrial band” got chewed up by the industry. Slowly, steadily, Devo capitulated to the record biz way of doing things. The band had sold two million albums by 1981, but this only made Warner Brothers increase the pressure in hopes of breaking them even bigger. “They wanted us to be at the Cars’ level,” sighs Casale. Even as they railed against Reaganism with songs like “Freedom of Choice” and “Through Being Cool,” Devo found themselves increasingly bossed around by their record company. They struggled on for years, wrangling for the “Whip It”-scale radio hit that never came, stuck at a middling success level just a notch above cult. In a savagely ironic twist, they succumbed to their own unique form of devolution, winding up as a sort of New Wave version of Kiss, peddling costume rock for nerd diehards. Obsessed with flashy high-tech projections, they resorted to playing gigs to a click track fed through headphones in order to stay in sync with the visuals. Instead of a parody of regimentation, they became the real thing—slaves to slickness, peons in the “corporate feudal state.”

CHAPTER 6

CABARET VOLTAIRE, THE HUMAN LEAGUE, AND THE SHEFFIELD SCENE

SHEFFIELD AND MANCHESTER, the twin engines of the industrial revolution in Britain, were peculiarly receptive to the bleakly futuristic, synth-enhanced sounds of Devo and Pere Ubu. Less than forty miles apart in Northern England but separated by the Pennines mountain range, these cities shared with Cleveland a self-belief only slightly dented by having fallen on hard times, a sort of “we used to be great...and we’ll show you yet” attitude. Both cities also had their own equivalents to the Flats in Cleveland, harsh-on-the-eye hinterlands where heavy industry clanked and pounded day and night.

Sheffield was the home of innovations like stainless steel and Bessemer’s converter (which made mass production of low-cost steel possible in the late nineteenth century). Although just a ten-minute drive from the picturesque Peak District and the vales of Derbyshire, Sheffield’s enduring popular image is grim and gray, based on the inner city and the heavily industrialized East End. “That’s where I lived with my parents,” says Richard H. Kirk of Cabaret Voltaire. “You looked down into the valley and all you could see was blackened buildings. At night, in bed, you could hear the big drop forges crunching away.” Human League’s Martyn Ware likewise talks of growing up in a clangorous science-fiction noisescape, all the strange machine sounds generated by Sheffield’s steel industry.

One of the first British cities to become industrialized, Sheffield rapidly acquired a proletariat in the classic sense defined by Karl Marx—human beings reduced to appendages of flesh attached to machinery, acutely conscious of both their exploitation and their common interest in struggling for better conditions. Until recently, the city was a bastion of *old* Labour, the pre-Tony Blair party that was closely linked to the trade union movement and whose members took seriously the Labour charter’s commitment to state ownership of major industries such as steel, 90 percent of which was combined into the publicly owned British Steel Corporation in 1967. The Sheffield region was nicknamed “the People’s Republic of South Yorkshire,” on account of the city’s hard-line Socialist council, who actually flew the red flag from the town hall.

For those who grew up in the suburban south of England, becoming a left-wing militant was rebellious, a way of defining themselves against their bourgeois parents. But in Sheffield, where hard-Left politics was an everyday thing, the dissident thing to do was to become an artist. For the teenage Richard H. Kirk, being a member of the Young Communist League was almost like going to Sunday

school. “My dad was a member of the party at one point, and I wore the badge when I went to school. But I never took it really seriously.” Instead, Kirk was drawn to Dada’s unconstructive revolt and intoxicating irrationalism.

Although other heavily industrial parts of Britain suffered steadily rising unemployment and factory closures in the seventies, Sheffield remained relatively prosperous. The steel industry didn’t sharply decline until Thatcher took power in 1979. If there was deprivation, it was cultural. Nonconformist Sheffield youth grabbed on to whatever sources of stimulation they could find: pop music, art, glam clothes, science fiction, or, better still, some combination of them all.

That’s why *A Clockwork Orange*—Anthony Burgess’s 1962 book, Stanley Kubrick’s 1970 film, and Walter Carlos’s electronic movie score—had such an impact in Sheffield. Set in a near future Britain, *A Clockwork Orange* focuses on a marauding gang of teenagers, vicious dandies who live for gratuitous “ultraviolence.” Roaming a grim cityscape of high-rise apartment blocks, power plants, and dilapidated FilmDromes, these glammed-up thugs mug old people for a lark and spar bloodily with rival gangs. Although Burgess drew specific inspiration from his hometown of Manchester, *Clockwork Orange*’s backdrop was familiar to anyone living in urban Britain during the 1970s. Tower blocks, skyways, shadowy underpasses: This was the desolate psychogeography of a new England created by town planners and Brutalist architects from the early 1960s onward. The Human League titled their second EP, *The Dignity of Labour*, after a mural in the high-rise Municipal Flatblock where *Clockwork Orange*’s antihero, Alex, visits his parents. Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh later named their post-Human League outfit Heaven 17 after an imaginary pop group in the novel. Adi Newton, a former associate of Ware’s and Marsh’s, called his band Clock DVA—“DVA” meaning the number two in the pidgin-Russian slang that Alex and his “droogs” speak.

As for Walter Carlos’s *Clockwork Orange* score, this was simply the first time most Sheffield kids heard full-on electronic music. There’d been tantalizing glimpses of synthesized sound here and there in progressive rock from groups like Emerson, Lake, and Palmer. “ELP were awful rubbish apart from when Keith Emerson was playing the Moog, and then it was *sublime*,” says Phil Oakey, singer of the Human League. Otherwise, just about the hardest hit of electronic sound you could get from pop in the early seventies was Roxy Music, which featured Eno’s abstract spurts of synth noise.

Roxy were massive in Sheffield. The group’s flamboyant, future-retro image inspired the posthippie generation to glam up and dance at Sheffield clubs like the Crazy Daisy. And Roxy performed regularly in the city. “When you went to see them you’d wait until you were on

the bus before applying the glitter, so your mum and dad didn't see," recalls Oakey. "Martyn was more daring than me, he'd be going through the toughest areas of town in green fur jackets and high-heel shoes." At parties, people used to greet Ware and Oakey with, "Oh, look, it's Mackay and Eno," Andy Mackay being Roxy's fruity-looking saxophonist. Ambiguously pitched between irony and romanticism, Roxy were the aesthete's option. "I remember buying the first Roxy album and listening to it with the gatefold sleeve open, spread out on the floor," says Ware. "The entire atmosphere around the record was as important as the music. It all came together as a *piece of art*, for me."

The early seventies were the golden age of both theatrical rock performers (Bowie, Alice Cooper, Peter Dinklage-era Genesis) and rock theater (musicals such as *The Rocky Horror Show* and *Rock Follies*). So it's only right that in glam-besotted Sheffield, a future generation of local pop stars would be nurtured in a youth theater project. Funded by the city council, Meatwhistle evolved into a kind of experimental performance space for bright teenagers. Amongst its participants were a good proportion of the future prime movers in Sheffield's postpunk scene, including Ian Craig Marsh and Martyn Ware of the Future/Human League/Heaven 17, Adi Newton of the Future and Clock DVA, Paul Bower—founder of the punk zine *Gun Rubber* and leader of the band 2.3—and Glenn Gregory, who would become the singer in Heaven 17.

"Meatwhistle started in the summer of 1972, when I was about sixteen," says Marsh. "They came up with this idea of opening up the Crucible Theatre to teenage schoolkids for the summer." After a wildly successful production of *Marat-Sade*, Meatwhistle's organizers—arty bohemian playwright/actor Chris Wilkinson and his wife, Veronica—were given an entire vacant school. "It was a big, old Victorian building, three or four floors, huge ceilings," recalls Ware. The Wilkinsons lobbied successfully for funding for lights, video cameras, and musical instruments. "Gradually Meatwhistle got a lot more experimental and creative, as all the disaffected juveniles in Sheffield started congregating there," says Marsh. "Bands were rehearsing at Meatwhistle because there were loads of spare rooms. Generally speaking, everyone was free to do what they wanted." There was a strong element of everybody colluding, Marsh says, to get away with as much as possible. The name itself, Meatwhistle, was dead cheeky. The Wilkinsons claimed it was Chaucerian. Actually it's slang for the male member.

Each Sunday, the Meatwhistle collective staged a show, which might encompass anything from bands playing to short plays to comedy sketches. It was for one of these Sunday revues that Marsh

formed his first group, the shock rock duo Musical Vomit. “I got the name from a *Melody Maker* live review of Suicide. To *MM* with its prog-rock attitude, Suicide were a sheer insult to your ears, so the reviewer described them as ‘musical vomit.’ I thought, ‘What a great name for a band.’ This guy Mark Civico sang and I’d go onstage with a guitar I could barely play, making percussive noise and feedback.” After a while Marsh left and Musical Vomit became closer to a proper band, albeit with a spoof rock edge and an ever shifting, expanding, and contracting lineup that included at various points Glenn Gregory, Paul Bower, and Martyn Ware.

By this point, Meatwhistle was a cross between an “intellectual youth club” (as Ware puts it) and an experimental-pop laboratory, with an endless stream of imaginary bands that only existed for one night’s performance and had names like the Underpants, the Dead Daughters, and Androids Don’t Bleed. “The vibe was very New York Dolls, everyone dressing up madly and adopting fake names like Eddie Brando and Dick Velcro,” recalls Marsh. Musical Vomit, meanwhile, had graduated to performing intermittently before real audiences. With sick, humorous songs about masturbation or necrophilia, and stunts like the lead singer puking up vegetable soup, the band operated somewhere between Alice Cooper-style shock rock and the satirical-theatrical comedy rock of the Tubes. Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex later declared Musical Vomit, whom she’d seen in the midseventies, to be Britain’s very first punk band.

Although they didn’t participate in Meatwhistle, Cabaret Voltaire sank many a pint with the Musical Vomit crew. One thing they had in common was a passion for Roxy Music. “That era in ’73 when Roxy were really at the cutting edge, that’s what really got us going,” says Richard H. Kirk. “We’d read Eno in interviews talking about how anyone can make music because you don’t need to learn an instrument, you can use a tape recorder or a synth.” The group were such fans that Kirk and fellow Cab Chris Watson even went to hear Eno speak at Bradford Art College, clutching a reel-to-reel tape of their early recordings. Unable to buttonhole him after the lecture, they cornered Eno in the men’s bathroom and pressed the demo reel into his apprehensive hands.

Echoing Eno’s rhetoric, the group initially saw themselves less as a musical entity than as a “sound group,” says Kirk, doing a lo-fi, garage band version of *musique concrète*. “We started in late 1973 and initially there was a large group of people involved, a gang of mates interested in a bit of art and some films and a few strange books.” Most prominent among those “strange books” were the works of William S. Burroughs. In the early seventies, Burroughs was esoteric knowledge. His sixties notoriety had waned, he’d disappeared into reclusion, and

his novels weren't that easy to find. Cabaret Voltaire were especially taken with the cut-up techniques developed by Burroughs in tandem with Brion Gysin. These involved chopping up text or sound and recombining them in order to disrupt the linearity of thought, each snip/splice serving as a fissure through which "the future leaks," as Burroughs and Gysin put it. You can hear another Burroughsian influence—the flat, matter-of-fact depiction of extreme and grotesque acts of sex and violence—in the spoken-word voice-overs that accompany some early Cabaret Voltaire pieces, such as the fetid imagery of "Bed Time Stories": "With dogs that are trained to sniff out corpses/Eat my remains but leave my feet/I'll hold a séance with Moroccan rapists/Masturbating end over end."

Kirk, who left art school after the first year, was a fan of the original anti-art art movement, Dada. The name Cabaret Voltaire came from the Zurich nightclub/salon where Tristan Tzara, Hugo Ball, et al. declaimed their sound poetry while World War I raged across Europe. Chris Watson, outwardly the most "normal" member of the group (his day job was working as a telephone engineer) was also a Dada fiend. He'd stumbled on a book about the movement as a teenager in 1970, an experience that "just hit me so hard it changed the way I've thought ever since." Dada's assault on meaning and taste, along with its collage techniques, fired the group's imagination.

By 1974, the gang had whittled down to Kirk, Stephen Mallinder, and Watson, whose attic became their sound lab. "We studiously went there Tuesdays and Thursdays every week and experimented for two hours or so, during which time we'd lay down maybe three or four compositions," recalls Kirk. The trio recorded their abstract sound collages straight to tape, resulting in a massive archive, some of which was exhumed for *Methodology '74/'78. Attic Tapes*, a box set released in 2002. Creaky and homespun, the Cabs' early stabs at *concrète*, such as "Dream Sequence Number Two Ethel's Voice," have an alien-yet-quaint quality, while more ferocious tracks like "Henderson Reversed Piece Two," all rattling synthetic percussion and soiled sheets of sound, recall avant-classical electronic composers such as Morton Subotnick.

At this point, Cabaret Voltaire didn't resemble a rock band in any respect. For starters, they didn't have a drummer. "We didn't want a rock guy showing off and doing drum solos," says Kirk. "We wanted steady, mechanical repetition." At a Sheffield music shop, "a dodgy-looking chap with a toupee" approached them and sold them a Farfisa drum machine he had at home. Guitar didn't enter the picture until quite late. For a while they didn't even have a proper synth, instead using tape loops and a primitive oscillator built by Watson. Kirk's primary instrument was the clarinet, fed through effects to sound

harshly processed and eerie, as on the psychotic-bucolic “Fuse Mountain,” which summons up the image of a circle of cross-legged hippies playing flutes on a mound of iron ore outside a derelict steel mill. Almost every sound source—the group’s voices, Mallinder’s bass, Watson’s organ, found sounds—was sent through ring modulators or a chain of effects devices, emerging warped and contaminated on the other side.

In these first couple of years prior to punk, Cabaret Voltaire “never had any notion that we could ever make and release records,” says Kirk. “It was all done for our own amusement. We’d do mad stuff—drive around in a van with tape loops playing out the back, or go into pubs with a tape machine and play weird stuff—just trying to wind people up, really.” Provocation for its own sake was the name of the game. Cabaret Voltaire drew hard stares for the way they looked, too. They were fashion crazy, starting with the skinhead look in their early teens, progressing to glam, and finally developing a do-it-yourself style based around old clothes from charity thrift stores, which they’d customize with paint. Mallinder was the group’s ace stylist. “He had two rooms in his flat, one in which he lived and the other which served as his wardrobe,” recalls *NME*’s Sheffield correspondent Andy Gill (no relation to Gang of Four’s guitarist). As documented in the Sheffield zine *Gun Rubber*, a typical outfit for Mallinder might be gray pleated flannels, snakeskin shoes, a red Hawaiian shirt with the collar turned up, and a suede U.S. Air Force jacket. Looking as concertedly stylized as Mallinder did was a real statement at a time when most ordinary young men wore bell-bottom slacks and platforms while sporting sideburns and straggly shoulder-length hair.

Sheffield was a surprisingly compatible environment for the bohemian lifestyle. You didn’t need much money, thanks to the city-subsidized buses and the plethora of empty warehouses that could be squatted or cheaply rented as rehearsal spaces. The art colleges and the University of Sheffield provided student bars with dirt cheap beer and various undergraduate societies put on gigs. Cabaret Voltaire conned one of these organizations, Science for the People, into letting them play their Tuesday-night disco, reassuring the booker, “Oh yes, we play rock.”

On May 13, 1975, the Cabs played their debut gig to a room full of bemused students. Tristan Tzara would have been proud of the boys, who managed to trigger an audience riot to rival anything stirred up by the dadaists. “We had a tape loop of a recording of a steam hammer as percussion, and Richard was playing a clarinet with a rubberized jacket on it covered with flashing fairy lights, and it just ended with the audience invading the stage and beating us up,” Watson recalled years later. In the melee, Mallinder fell offstage,

chipped a bone in his back, and had to be taken to the hospital. Kirk wielded his clarinet like a club to beat off the attackers, then hurled his homemade guitar into the audience. According to Kirk, "The people who attacked us ended up with the nastier injuries because a lot of people who came to see us, including some very dodgy people, took it upon themselves to take our side of the argument. Everyone was very drunk, and everything just went mad."

Cabaret Voltaire's next bout of *épater les bourgeois* also took place at the university. "One of the guys in the music department got us to do a performance interpreting this piece, *Exhaust*, by this bona fide classical composer Jean-Yves Bosseur," recalls Kirk. "We just played a tape loop of someone saying the word 'exhaust' overlaid with some music, and we had film loops running that started melting. They were freaked out and we didn't get invited to the after party." This was 1976, the same year that Musical Vomit triggered a similarly negative, but much more physically demonstrative, response from the audience at the Bath Arts Festival, exiting the stage in a hailstorm of beer cans.

When punk came along, Cabaret Voltaire and the Meatwhistle/Musical Vomit crew were thrilled by its shock effects and sartorial provocations. "It just seemed a natural progression from glam to punk," recalls Phil Oakey. "The same kids that had been wearing fake animal prints were suddenly wearing vinyl with safety pins through it. I *did* have the first zip T-shirt in Sheffield because I made it myself." The first time Oakey met Ian Craig Marsh, the latter was dressed to distress. "I had really tight drainpipe jeans, stitched at the crotch with leather, and instead of a T-shirt I had a pair of women's tights, with the crotch ripped out for my neck to go through, pulled over my head and stretched really tight. And I'd got a cigarette and burned holes in it, so it was split everywhere. The finishing touch was the bracelets: two small, individual-portion baked-bean cans, cut out at both ends and then slipped over my wrists."

In June 1977, all three members of Cabaret Voltaire joined Marsh, Adi Newton, Glenn Gregory, Martyn Ware, and 2.3's drummer Hayden Boyes-Weston for a one-off gig as the punk-spoof supergroup the Studs. "It was an anarchic, raw event," recalls Newton. "One of our helpers had a bag of pig ears which were liberally thrown at the audience." After chaotic, improvised versions of the Kingsmen's "Louie Louie," Lou Reed's "Vicious," and Iggy Pop's "Cock in My Pocket," the band left the stage to howls of abuse.

The Studs were just a bit of fun, though. Where punk had inspired kids all across the U.K. to grab guitars and make sub-Clash two-chord thrash, Sheffield's resident aesthetes turned up their noses at the idea of back-to-basics garageland rock 'n' roll. "There were no punk bands at all in Sheffield," claims Phil Oakey. Partly out of a typically

stubborn Northern disinclination to follow London's lead, and partly impelled by a native spirit of futurism, the local groups tended to embrace synths, tape recorders, and crude rhythm boxes rather than the standard rock instrumentation of guitars, bass, and drums.

Punk rock seemed *passé* by the end of that summer anyway. "Initially we saw it as maybe a rebirth, and then we came to see it as the end of the cycle," says Marsh. "It was obvious that punk wasn't leading to anything interesting or new. When we started the Future, we were definitely on a mission to destroy rock 'n' roll." Martyn Ware, who cofounded the Future with Marsh and Newton, didn't even bother to see the Sex Pistols and the Clash when they played in Sheffield. He'd actually *tried* to play guitar, but gave up in disgust when he learned that to stop his fingers from bleeding he'd have to toughen the skin by soaking them in alcohol. Luckily, in the summer of 1977 two epochal records arrived to show Marsh and Ware the shining synth-paved path to tomorrow: Kraftwerk's *Trans-Europe Express* and Donna Summer's "I Feel Love." The pair were convinced that synths and machine rhythm were the way to go. "We were dead against doing anything with guitars, full-stop," says Marsh. "It became our manifesto: No standard instrumentation."

Having dropped out of the Meatwhistle scene to work as a computer operator, Marsh now had money to burn. He bought a build-your-own-synth kit he'd seen advertised in *Practical Electronics* magazine. "There were no real commercial synths available at the time. The early Moogs were custom-made and cost a fortune, a hundred grand or something like that. Strictly prog-rock supergroup territory. The synth kit I bought, you needed some degree of technical smarts to be able to solder it together."

Marsh started hanging out at Meatwhistle again, sometimes dragging the machine down there and tinkering with it. Intrigued, Ware suggested an arrangement where he'd help Marsh pay for the synth in return for access to it. "But it was virtually unplayable, and generally took about half an hour to tune up," says Marsh. "It was only really good for weird noises." Between the two of them, they acquired two superior machines: the Korg 700S, a simple monophonic keyboard synth ("monophonic" meaning you could only play one note at a time, no chords), and the Roland System 100. The latter cost £800—a small fortune in 1977—but had infinitely more creative potential. Instead of a keyboard and preset sounds, the System 100 was a "patch player" machine. Its innards in plain view, the machine was a tangle of wires, sockets, and knobs. The operator created his own sounds, "synth patches," by adjusting all kinds of variables. In order to remember how a specific sound had been made, it was necessary to sketch out where all the different cables went, the levels at which

various “potentiometers” (dials) were set, and so forth. “But however carefully you notated stuff down, there were so many critical variables you’d never quite get the same sound back,” says Marsh. “So there was a random element you just had to give yourself up to.”

In the Future, Marsh used the System 100 to generate alien noises and futuristic textures, while Ware used the Korg to play simple one-finger melody lines. The music was minimalist by default. Producing coherent rhythm proved even more challenging. In the days before drum machines, you could get rudimentary rhythm generators and keyboards featuring preset beats (tango, disco, rock, etc.), but there was no scope for programming new and unique rhythms. To get around this, Marsh created percussion sounds from scratch using the System 100. He’d take a noise, filter it, then sculpt the “envelope” of the sound so that it had the attack and decay of a particular drum. White noise was good for ersatz hi-hats and cymbals, while the duller-sounding “pink noise” could be made to resemble the woody thud of bass drums and snares. Gathering these pseudopercussive noises, Marsh painstakingly sequenced them to resemble a full-kit drum track. Inevitably, the results were a bit stilted.

The Future’s third member, Adi Newton, was the one most interested in abstract sound experiments using tape recorders. “Adi had been to art school and he introduced me to a lot of modern-art stuff—Man Ray, Duchamp,” says Marsh. Newton had rented some rooms in a derelict factory to use as a painting and music studio. He also lived there. Twenty-one B Devonshire Lane became “a location of many wild parties and a drug experimentation zone,” Newton recalls. It also served as the Future’s studio base.

Initially, the Future came up with the “rather radical idea that we’d have shared vocals,” says Marsh. “We dispensed with our names and called ourselves A, B, and C. It was all very computer orientated and linked to this lyric composition program we created called CARLOS: Cyclic and Random Lyric Organization System.” A cybernetic version of Burroughs’s and Gysin’s cut-ups and surrealist automatic writing, CARLOS, says Ware, was a bit like a slot machine. “You’d pump in, like, one hundred nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, whatever, and it would pump out random lyrics.” Specific lines or words were assigned to individual voices—A, B, or C. “In the end we abandoned the system for more straightforward vocals, which Adi tended to do,” says Marsh wistfully. “Blank Clocks,” one of the few successful and surviving CARLOS tracks, shuffles a restricted number of nouns and modifiers in slightly different combinations: “Your heart the thigh my pain blank time your face the clock my mind/Blank heart your thigh the pain/My time blank face your clock/The mind my heart blank thigh your pain the time my face,” etc.

At this point, the Future had a decidedly progressive rather than pop slant. Tangerine Dream is audible in the doomy techno-Gothic mindscapes of "Future Religion," while the desolate electronic vistas of "Last Man on Earth" are just ten minutes excerpted from a piece that was originally one hour and thirty-seven minutes long. Nothing could have been further from 1977's new punk norm of two chords and two minutes. But in August of that year, the Future approached the London major labels in search of a record deal. They sent an eye-catching, computer-graphic-laden brochure to fifteen companies. "Not many people then had access to computers, and we had all these bizarre dot matrix designs on computer printout paper with perforated edges," says Marsh. "We sent out our manifesto and said we wouldn't be sending demo tapes, but would be in London on certain dates and would play them the tapes if they wanted to make an appointment. Surprisingly, we got nine replies, big names like EMI, Island, CBS."

With punk at its height, the labels were looking for New Wave acts. "The A&R guys at the record companies were all forty and looked ridiculous in these rubber tops with zips they'd bought down the King's Road," says Marsh. Most of the companies showed the band the door after hearing the tapes. Only Island Records expressed enthusiasm. "They said they were really interested but thought we should go away, work the music up into more songlike forms, and return in six months," says Ware. Returning to Sheffield determined to follow Island's "constructive advice," Marsh and Ware realized that "Adi couldn't actually sing a note, and more to the point didn't really *want* to sing. He was more into voice as weapon." They decided to cut him loose. Surreptitiously, they moved all the equipment from Devonshire Lane to Marsh's apartment and left Newton a note. "We broke contact for a while, until he cooled off," says Marsh.

Singer-less, the Future made instrumentals for a while. "Dancevision" sounds like a blueprint for Detroit techno with its neon lights glimmer and stringlike sounds evoking some ambiguous alloy of euphoria and grief. But a vocalist was clearly required. In November 1977, Ware had a brainstorm. "I told Ian I knew this guy from my school days who could sing and who looked fantastic. He was the coolest guy in Sheffield, rode big fuck-off Norton motorbikes and had this lopsided hairstyle. He looked totally androgynous and the girls just thought he was gorgeous." The guy was Phil Oakey and the hairstyle was something he'd spotted on a girl on a bus, a hair model sporting a version of a famous Vidal Sassoon cut from the sixties.

Oakey was the youngest of four sons in a working-class-made-good family. "My dad was a top postmaster and by the time I came along, we were quite well-off. We lived in a posh suburb." As a youth, his great passions were motorbikes, glam style, pop music, and science

fiction. “I ended up working two years in a university bookshop and I had every science-fiction paperback you could get. I was really into Philip K. Dick and Ballard.” Dick’s influence is all over early Human League. “Circus of Death,” the B-side of their debut single, was partly inspired by *Ubik*, while “Almost Medieval” from the first album, *Reproduction*, is based on *Counter-Clock World*, a novel in which time goes backward.

Oakey had no real ambitions to be a pop singer. He was a hospital porter when Ware suggested he try out as the Future’s front man. “We gave him the backing track to ‘Being Boiled’ and two days later he came back and said, ‘I don’t know if you’ll like this.’” He’d come up with a bizarre lyric blending stuff about the senseless slaughter of silkworms with confused, ill-digested notions about Eastern religion. Nonsense, but delivered in Oakey’s commanding baritone, it sounded wonderfully baleful. “We heard the first lines—‘Listen to the voice of Buddha/Saying stop your sericulture’—and it was a turning point.” Oakey joined the group, but he wasn’t keen on the Future as the name, so they came up with the Human League, taken from a science-fiction game about two warring intergalactic empires.

With Oakey on board, the group shifted decisively in a pop direction with songs like “Dance Like a Star,” a lo-fi, cobbled-together counterpart to Summer and Moroder’s “I Feel Love.” At the start of the song, Oakey taunts, “This is a song for all you bigheads out there who think disco music is lower than the irrelevant musical gibberish and tired platitudes that you try to impress your parents with. We’re the Human League, we’re much cleverer than you, and this is called ‘Dance Like a Star.’” Shedding their prog side, the Human League began to develop a new aesthetic, not art rock so much as art pop. Highbrows aligning themselves with commercial dance pop (Abba, Eurodisco, Chic), they now sneered at the sort of middlebrow notions of deep and meaningful (the Pink Floyd/Cure/Radiohead continuum) typically cherished by college students. As part of their newfound appreciation for conveyor belt pop and epic schmaltz, the Human League started to work up all-electronic cover versions of sixties classics like the Righteous Brothers’ “You’ve Lost That Lovin’ Feeling.”

The next threshold for the Human League came courtesy of scenester Paul Bower. His band 2.3 were set to release their debut single, “Where To Now?” on Fast Product. Bowers loved the Human League’s material, especially “Being Boiled.” He gave a demo tape of the song to Bob Last, who liked it so much he wanted to release it without any rerecording. Last, a huge Parliament-Funkadelic fan, recalls hearing “this phenomenal fat bass riff in the middle of ‘Being Boiled,’ like a mutant Bootsy Collins riff. I was like, ‘God, we’ve got to put this out.’” Last also dug the way Human League “played with this

whole cultural landscape of kitsch,” simultaneously embracing and making fun of it. This aspect came to the fore on “Circus of Death,” the companion track to “Being Boiled,” which Ware once described as “a subliminal trip through all the very trashiest films.” The story involves an evil clown who runs a nightmare circus and uses the sinister mind control drug Dominion to pacify the population, with Steve McGarrett from *Hawaii Five-O* flying in to the rescue.

“Being Boiled” was released in June 1978 with the slogan “Electronically yours” on its cover. That same month, the Human League made their live debut at the Psalter Lane art college in Sheffield. To reproduce the tracks they came up with a solution that was both pragmatic and artistically appealing. “We went onstage with a tape recorder, with the rhythm and bass on tape,” says Marsh. “We liked the idea of putting the machine where the drummer ought to be, with a spotlight on it. Then we’d come onstage, take our positions by the keyboards, and then very pointedly I’d walk over and press ‘play.’ We knew this would be a big windup to the rock ‘n’ roll fraternity, the keep-music-live crew. At that time the only people using backing tapes were disco artists doing personal appearances in nightclubs.”

The first show went well because some art students had erected a wall of badly tuned TV sets behind the band, but subsequent gigs suffered because the Human League weren’t much to look at. “Me and Martyn were static behind the synths,” says Marsh, while Oakey was rigid with stage fright. Then an art student named Adrian Wright came up and offered to rectify their image deficit with slide projections. “Adrian had access to professional Kodak slide machines. He could scam them off the college,” says Marsh. And so the Human League acquired its fourth member, giving him the title director of visuals.

Wright was an obsessive collector of pulp ephemera: *Man from U.N.C.L.E.* cards, Rin Tin Tin books, memorabilia from *Doctor Who* and Gerry Anderson’s marionette series *Thunderbirds* and *Stingray*. “If you went ‘round to Adrian’s bedsit, every single square inch of wall space, from floor to ceiling, was full of comics and toys,” says Ware. Wright also had a fascination with celebrity culture, says Oakey, “people who manipulated the media to their own advantage. He was absolutely fascinated by the Kennedys and Hitler, to the point where some people thought he was fascist. But in fact, he was just interested in their use of image and propaganda.” For the Human League, Wright developed an increasingly complex set of slide projections, juxtaposing imagery from science and technology (rockets, graphs, diagrams, oil rigs), nature (flowers, animals), and popular culture (erotica, celebrities, advertisements). “The first time we had the slides, this free gig at the Limit in Sheffield, was our first really successful show,” says

Marsh.

Following the release of “Being Boiled” and their first gigs outside Sheffield, the Human League started to get celebrity endorsements. David Bowie hailed them as a glimpse of pop’s future. They played in Europe on the same bill as Devo and Iggy Pop. They were invited to support Siouxsie and the Banshees on tour, for which they made their own fiberglass “riot shields” to protect the synths from lobbed beer. The partnership with Fast Product blossomed, with Bob Last functioning creatively almost as a fifth member of the band. Eventually he became their manager. “Bob had this fantastic sensibility where everything was an art event,” says Ware.

Along with a passion for concept and presentation, the League and Fast also shared the same antihippie, antislacker, no-time-for-flabby-thinking attitude. According to Ware, “We were into action, this super-Protestant, must-work-all-day outlook that is very much part of Sheffield.” The Human League’s second release for Fast Product was a tribute to the worker. The *Dignity of Labour* EP consisted of four electronic instrumentals inspired by the Soviet space program, all offering a different slant on a central concept: the extent to which modern technology ultimately depended upon the workers. In this case, Russian miners, toiling deep beneath the Earth’s crust, excavated the coal needed to make steel, which was then made into gantries for Yury Gagarin’s spaceship. Gagarin appears on the EP’s front cover as a splendidly isolated figure walking across a Moscow square to receive a medal for being the first human in outer space. The EP came with a free flexidisc, which documented—in true Brechtian fashion—the band and Last debating what the record sleeve should be. At the end, Oakey makes a brief statement about the concept EP’s theme of individualism versus collectivism.

Dignity of Labour was released in April 1979 on the eve of Britain’s general election. The ensuing massive defeat for the Labour government inaugurated an era in which individualism would be championed at the expense of collective values. “You couldn’t live in Sheffield and not be aware that the industrial era was crumbling,” says Last. “So on one level the EP was a totally serious hymn to the dignity of workers. But at the same time, it was imbued with many levels of irony, doubt, and alienation.” Despite its timely resonance and atmospheric, ahead-of-its-time electronica, the EP’s pensive instrumentals confused most “Being Boiled” fans.

Last believed there was no point in putting out a third League single on Fast Product and decided to secure a major-label deal for the group. Approaching the big companies again, the Human League pitched themselves as the trailblazers of music’s next big thing, a wave of positivity after punk’s nihilism and outrage. “Blind Youth,” the first

song on their demo tape, ridiculed fashionable doom-and-gloom mongers, especially people who regarded modern urban life as some kind of dystopian nightmare. "High-rise living's not so bad," sings Oakey, a dig aimed equally at Ballard and the Clash, "Dehumanization is such a big word/It's been around since Richard the Third." Rejecting punk's "no future" stance, the Human League exhorted the blind youth of Britain to "Take hope/Your time is due/Big fun come soon/Now is calling."

CABARET VOLTAIRE'S RESPONSE to punk was different. To some extent, they went along with the ride. Kirk began to push guitar to the fore. Where once all three voices had been used, Mallinder settled into the role of lead singer, his vocals sinister and low in the mix. The Cabs started playing live regularly, renting rooms above pubs and promoting their own gigs. They wangled their way into the punk world, sending off tapes to New Hormones' Richard Boon, who didn't have the cash to release a record but gave them a supporting slot with Buzzcocks in March 1978. "It was at the Lyceum, the Slits were on the same bill, a complete fucking nightmare," recalls Kirk. "Full of crazed punk rockers. We got covered in spit."

Shortly after the Lyceum gig, Cabaret Voltaire moved their operational base from Chris Watson's attic to a building called Western Works. The Cabs' new headquarters had formerly been the offices of the Sheffield Federation of Young Socialists. "If you look at old photos of us rehearsing at Western Works, you'll see this wall behind us covered with all these old socialist posters from the sixties and seventies. We left them there because we thought it made a nice backdrop."

Having a space to hang out and work at any hour of the day was a breakthrough, says Kirk. The acquisition of their own multitrack tape machine and mixing board enabled Cabaret Voltaire to make recordings with good enough sound quality to release. This was the logical extension of the do-it-yourself impulse, no longer having to rent a studio and deal with the resident recalcitrant engineer or the ticking clock, but being able to spend as much time as one wanted on the recording process. Through the eighties and into the techno nineties, this kind of self-sufficient entrepreneurial collective would become widespread. In 1978, Cabaret Voltaire were developing the model for a kind of postsocialist microcapitalism, an autonomy that represented if not exactly resistance, then a form of grassroots resilience in the face of top-down corporate culture. "When you have your own studio, you don't have to be beholden to some record

company that's paying the bills," says Kirk. "Western Works gave us the freedom to do what we wanted."

Initially, however, Cabaret Voltaire couldn't afford to be totally autonomous, so Rough Trade "advanced us enough money to buy the four-track and mixing desk," says Kirk. Actually recorded before they acquired the new studio setup, the group's debut record, *Extended Play*, was released by Rough Trade in October 1978. The four-song EP kicked off a remarkable run of releases via the label that lasted until 1982 and included six classic singles, four landmark long-players, numerous live albums, and the odd mini-LP.

Somewhere between 1977 and 1979, the definitive Cabaret Voltaire sound took shape: the hissing hi-hats and squelchy snares of their rhythm generator, Watson's smears of synth slime, Mallinder's dankly pulsing bass, and Kirk's spikes of shattered-glass guitar. Everything coalesces on singles such as "Silent Command" and "Seconds Too Late" to create a stalking hypno-groove somewhere between death disco and Eastern Bloc skank. Another Cabaret Voltaire hallmark was the dehumanizing of Mallinder's voice via creepy treatments that made him sound reptilian, alien, or, at the extreme, like some kind of metallic or mineralized being. On "Silent Command," for instance, Mal's vocal bubbles like molten glass being blown into distended shapes. On other singles, such as "Nag Nag Nag" and "Jazz the Glass," there's an almost charming sixties garage punk feel, the fuzztone guitar and Farfisa organ vamps recalling? and the Mysterians or the Seeds.

Having started out playing clarinet, an instrument more redolent of Jethro Tull than PiL, Kirk swiftly joined postpunk's pantheon of guitar innovators. You can hear the chill wind of his guitar sound emerging on "The Set Up" from the debut EP. Elsewhere he employs a choppy rhythm style, equal parts reggae's scratchy afterbeat and the itchy funk of Can's Michael Karoli. What really grabs your attention is Kirk's trademark timbre, a sensuous, brittle distortion like blistered metal or burning chrome, needling its way deep into your ear canal. Typically fed through delay units and heavy with sustain, Kirk's guitar arcs and recedes through soundscapes reverberant yet claustrophobic, like bunkers or underground missile silos. "Being a telephone engineer and good with electronics, Chris Watson was able to custom-build me a fuzzbox using this circuit he'd got from a magazine," says Kirk. "So no one else had this sound."

When it came to live shows, Cabaret Voltaire were as committed to multimedia as the Human League, but oriented more toward sensory overload. They used slide and film projectors to create a backdrop of unsynchronized, cut-up imagery: French porn, TV news, and movies. Bombarding the audience with data also related to Cabaret Voltaire's

conception of themselves as reporters. "We were more like, let's just present the facts and let people make up their own minds," says Kirk.

Cabaret Voltaire's reportorial approach meant that current events leaked into their music. Visiting the United States for the first time in November 1979, they caught wind of the impending shift to the Right with Reagan and the born-again Christian movement, which inspired their second album, *The Voice of America*. "We were fascinated by America but aware of its darker side. A big novelty for a bunch of kids from England, where TV finished at eleven P.M. and there were only three channels, was the fact that America had all-night TV and *loads* of stations. We just locked into this televangelist Eugene Scott, who had a low-rent show that was all about raising money. And the only reason he wanted the money was to stay on the air."

Scott's voice ended up on the classic Cabs single "Sluggin' fer Jesus," but before that came 1980's minialbum *Three Mantras*, an oblique response to events in the Middle East. Its two tracks, "Eastern Mantra" and "Western Mantra," contrasted the evil twins of fundamentalist Islam and bomb-again Christian America, "beloved enemies" locked in a clinch of clashing civilizations. "The whole Afghanistan situation was kicking off," recalls Kirk. "Iran had the American hostages. We were taking notice. It kind of culminated with our album *Red Mecca*." Purely through its ominous atmospheres and tense rhythms, *Red Mecca* also seemed to tap into closer-to-home turbulence. The unrest caused by mounting unemployment and police harassment of racial minorities and jobless youths finally erupted in the summer of 1981, with riots convulsing inner-city areas all across Britain, from Toxteth in Liverpool to Brixton in London.

If Cabaret Voltaire had any politics, they were of the anarcho-paranoid kind. They blended a Yorkshire-bred intransigence in the face of badge holders and bureaucrats with the sort of pot-fueled "never met a conspiracy theory I didn't like" attitude you encountered in squatland. Influenced by Burroughs and his paradoxically depersonalized yet personified vision of Control, the Cabs developed a worldview in which power figured as a demonic, omnipresent force, a multitentacled yet sourceless network of domination and mind coercion. "Being in a state of paranoia is a very healthy state to be in," Mallinder said. "It gives you a permanently questioning and searching nonacceptance of situations."

Along with paranoia, Cabaret Voltaire's other big P-word was pornography, something else Burroughs obsessively manifested in his fiction. Yet for the Cabs and other Sheffield groups, J. G. Ballard was even more important in this area, especially the hard-core, experimental short stories (or "condensed novels") such as "Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan," and "Plan for the Assassination of

Jacqueline Kennedy,” both of which were later incorporated into the book-length antinarrative *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Fusing clinically described avant-porn with Marshall McLuhan-esque insights into the mass media, Ballard probed the grotesque (de) formations of desire stimulated by media overload and celebrity worship, delineating with forensic precision an emergent psychomythology in which the deities and titans were movie idols like Elizabeth Taylor, icons like John F. Kennedy, or cult leaders like Charles Manson. Tapping into this Ballardian vision of “the communications landscape we inhabit” as a collective unconsciousness, out of which the “myths of the near future” were emerging, Cabaret Voltaire pioneered what would eventually become an industrial-music cliché, the use of vocal snippets stolen from movies and TV.

If Cabaret Voltaire were like dark-side pop art, mass culture dimly perceived through the murky prism of weed and speed, their friends the Human League were the sunny-side version of Warhol. You could imagine the Cabs watching the TV news with the sound off and a joint burning, marinating their minds in an ambient broth of catastrophe and conflict. Meanwhile, on the other side of Sheffield, the Human League were tuning in to cartoons, soaps, popular science programs such as *Tomorrow's World*, and, naturally, *Top of the Pops*. The convoluted route by which they got on *TOTP* themselves is another story altogether.

THE FALL, JOY DIVISION, AND THE MANCHESTER SCENE

GROWING UP IN CITIES physically and spiritually scarred by the violent nineteenth-century transition between rural folkways and the unnatural rhythms of industrial life, groups like Pere Ubu, Cabaret Voltaire, and, in Manchester, Joy Division and the Fall grappled with both the problems and possibilities of human existence in an increasingly technological world.

Yet as color-depleted and harsh as these postindustrial cities in England and Ohio were, it was possible—perhaps essential—to aestheticize their panoramas of decay. Hence the attraction and resonance of J. G. Ballard’s writing for bands from Manchester and Sheffield. In his classic seventies trilogy of *Crash*, *Concrete Island*, and *High-Rise*, the traumatized urban landscape serves not only as the backdrop but also, in a sense, the main *character* of the novels. Similarly, Ballard’s earlier short stories and cataclysm novels obsessively conjure an eerie, inhuman beauty from abandoned airfields, drained reservoirs, and deserted cities. In the same way that Pere Ubu romanticized the Flats of Cleveland, Ballard waxed lyrical in interviews about the “magic and poetry one feels when looking at a junkyard filled with old washing machines, or wrecked cars, or old ships rotting in some disused harbor.”

Assimilating the bleak Ballardian atmosphere of 1970s Manchester into their sound, Joy Division made music poised on the membrane between the local and universal, between the specifics of a period and place and timeless human fears and longings. The Fall did something quite different, creating a kind of social *surrealism*, a drug-skewed vision of Mancunian proletarian existence that brought out its submerged currents of grotesque absurdity and the uncanny.

In the late seventies, Fall singer Mark E. Smith rode his moped past an industrial estate called Trafford Park en route to his job in Manchester’s docks. Legend has it he often passed a young man, dressed in a similar-looking donkey jacket, on *his* way to work. It was Ian Curtis, future front man of Joy Division. “That was a bit spooky, they both looked quite like each other,” recalls Una Baines, Smith’s girlfriend at the time and keyboard player in the Fall.

Joy Division and the Fall had plenty in common. They shared similar backgrounds (upper working class meets petit bourgeois), similar education (state school, but “streamed” for white-collar work), similar jobs (Mark E. Smith was a shipping clerk, while Ian Curtis, Joy Division’s guitarist Bernard Sumner, and bassist Peter Hook all did clerical work for local government), and loved the same sort of bands (the Doors, the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, Can). Yet despite

rehearsing in the same building and even playing on some bills together, Joy Division and the Fall never acknowledged each other's existence. As if by unspoken agreement, they engaged in a taciturn struggle to be *the* defining Manchester band of the postpunk era. "We never spoke to each other!" laughs Martin Bramah, the Fall's guitarist. "I think they're great now, but at the time the Fall and Joy Division were definitely contending."

Fronted by singers who exuded a shamanic aura, Joy Division and the Fall conveyed a sense of strangeness and estrangement that travels far beyond the specifics of time and place. Yet it's hard to imagine them coming from anywhere else but 1970s Manchester. Something about the city's gloom and decrepitude seemed to seep deep into the fabric of their very different sounds. Although he didn't identify the place by name, Mark E. Smith immortalized the pollution-belching Trafford Park on "Industrial Estate," an early Fall classic. "The crap in the air will fuck up your face," Smith jeers. "That song is a very funny take on Manchester's history of having been the cradle of capitalism and then, by the 1970s, its grave," says Richard Boon, who funded the recording of the Fall's first EP but couldn't afford to actually release it on New Hormones.

"Grim beyond belief" is how Jon Savage describes his first impressions of Manchester as a Londoner relocating there in 1978. That bleakness endures today in pockets, even after a late-nineties redevelopment boom. A partial face-lift has dotted the city center with flashy designer wine bars and slick corporate offices, but the old nineteenth-century architecture abides. The somber, imposing edifices testify to the pride and prosperity of Manchester's self-made industrial tycoons. The dark red brickwork seems to soak up what scant daylight emanates from the typically slate gray skies. Those who venture outside the town center will encounter indelible residues of the city's past as the world capital of mechanized cotton manufacture: railway viaducts, canals the color of lead, converted warehouses and factories, and cleared lots littered with masonry shards and refuse.

By the 1970s, the world's first industrial city had become one of the first to enter the postindustrial era. The wealth had evaporated, but the desolate, denatured environment persisted. Attempts to renovate only made things worse. As in other cities across the U.K., urban planners razed the old Victorian terraced housing. Long-established working-class communities were broken up, the "slum" residents forcibly rehoused in high-rise apartment blocks and public-housing projects, which soon turned out to be unintended laboratories of social atomization. For Una Baines, this redevelopment figures as a kind of primal trauma. She remembers "my mum crying on the corner of the street when they knocked down our row of houses in

Collyhurst.” Frank Owen of the Manchester postpunk outfit Manicured Noise fulminates, “Those planners should be hung for what they did. They did more damage to Manchester than the German bombers did in World War Two, and all under this guise of benevolent social democracy.”

In the prepunk seventies, Manchester seemed to have all the bad aspects of urban life—pollution, eyesore architecture, all-enveloping dreariness—with barely any of its subcultural compensations. “There really was nothing going on until punk,” recalls Boon. “The industry was dying, the clothes were dreadful, the hair was awful.” Manchester’s starved souls grabbed for whatever source of stimulus or sparkle they could find, be it fashion, books, esoteric music, or drugs.

The Fall didn’t go in much for style. Scrawny, lank-haired, and typically wearing a scruffy pullover of indeterminate hue, Smith looked like a grown-up version of the runty schoolkid in *Kes*, Ken Loach’s 1969 social realist film. But the Fall were mad for the other three escape routes—literature, music, and illegal substances. In its earliest incarnation, the Fall resembled a poetry group more than a rock band. They’d hang out at Baines’s flat and read their scribblings to each other. “We all wrote words then, not just Mark,” recalls Bramah. Although they would have spurned the word “intellectual”—too redolent of the despised world of students and higher education—that’s what the four original members of the Fall were, working-class intellectuals. Bookworms, really, making good use of their library cards, devouring everything from Burroughs and Philip K. Dick to Yeats and Camus. Their name came from the latter’s novel *The Fall*, which bassist Tony Friel happened to be reading.

As for music, the Fall preferred what Smith called the “real heavy stuff.” Drug music, mostly, but not blissed-out pastoralism or cosmic buffoonery. Instead, the Fall tranced out to the primal monotony of Can, the methedrine-scorched white noise of the Velvet Underground, and sixties “punkadelic” bands like the Seeds (who only had one keyboard riff, which they endlessly recycled). “This is the three Rs/ Repetition repetition repetition,” quipped Smith on the Fall’s mission statement track, “Repetition.” Scorning “fancy music”—the overproduced mainstream rock of the day—“Repetition” exemplifies Smith’s early goal of “raw music with really weird vocals on top.” The rawness was supplied by Bramah’s thin, wheedling guitar lines, Baines’s wonky organ jabs (played on the cheap ’n’ nasty Snoopy keyboard, rated by *Sounds* as the absolute worst on the market), Friel’s capering bass, and Karl Burns’s ramshackle drums. The freak vocal element came from Smith’s half-sung, half-spoken drawl and wizened insolence.

Drugs? In an early interview, Smith described the Fall as “head

music with energy.” “Head,” in this case, didn’t mean cerebral or anti-dance but referred to the sixties idea of a “head,” someone into turning on and tripping out. Manchester had a strong underground drug culture, not so much a 1960s hangover, says Bramah, as the true, if slightly belated, arrival of the sixties in the early seventies. “We learned from people older than us, like John Cooper Clarke, the Manchester poet who lived in the same area as us, Prestwich. He was ten years older, from the sixties really. We were the next generation. We saw all the hippies who’d blown their brains out and we felt we were wiser than that, but still attracted to the drug experience.”

Circa 1973, a few years before the Fall existed as a musical entity, sixteen-year-old Mark E. Smith used to take acid and go to clubs wearing swastika armbands (a protopunk gesture of pure provocation, not an indication of fascist sympathies). Bramah recalls being given “microdots” and the next day going as a group to Heaton Park, where they dropped the acid and spent the whole day tripping. Later they discovered that Heaton Park was renowned among local heads for its psilocybin mushrooms. “There were just *fields* of them you could pick, and it was a totally free source of entertainment,” says Bramah. “From then on we were kind of *pickled* in mushrooms and LSD, really exploring music and discovering ourselves.”

Amphetamines also made their mark on the Fall. Speed stoked the group’s attitude, projected onstage through Smith’s searing, see-through-you gaze and aura of icy arrogance. It also shaped the Fall’s sound, their white-lightning rush of discords, over which Smith sounds like someone speed-rapping, the words spat out with oracular urgency, encrypted but mesmerizing. High doses of speed create a kind of “eureka!” sensation. The user feels like he’s accessed a truth invisible to others and can see occult connections. On *Live at the Witch Trials*, the group’s 1979 debut album, “Underground Medecin” and “Frightened” evoke the positive and negative sides of amphetamine abuse: the rush that lights up the nervous system (“I found a reason not to die,” Smith exults, “the spark inside”) versus the hypertense twitchiness of stimulant-induced paranoia. Despite these and other downsides to long-term speed use (ulcers, weight loss, schizophrenia), the Fall carried on exalting white-line fervor in songs like “Totally Wired” and “Mr. Pharmacist.”

The “pharmacist” in that song, which was originally recorded by sixties garage band the Other Half, is a drug dealer, a street punk dispensing doses of “energy.” The Fall were obsessed with the double standards surrounding drugs, the way some chemicals are proscribed while others get prescribed. Training as a psychiatric nurse at Prestwich Hospital, Baines came back every day from work and disgorged story after story about the mistreatment and neglect she’d

witnessed, including the use of downers to pacify the inmates. Her talk filtered into Smith's lyrics. "Repetition" refers to electroshock therapy (after you've had some, alleges Smith, you *lose* your love of repetition), while the Fall's 1979 single "Rowche Rumble" gets its title from Hoffmann-La Roche, the multinational pharmaceutical company that dominated the market for antidepressants.

Drugs of the socially sanctioned sort flooded Manchester in the seventies. Numbing and often incapacitating tranquilizers were massively overprescribed to help ordinary people (menopausal housewives, troubled teenagers, wage slaves cracked by stress and boredom) not so much manage their lives as be manageable. In an area like Hulme—whose infamous Crescents were a paradigm of the 1960s housing project gone wrong—antidepressants were dispensed so freely (a quarter of a million tablets in 1977 alone) that they verged on a form of social control. At the same time, Hulme illustrated the double standard (sedatives as prescribed remedy versus stimulants as illegal buzz) that Smith captured in the title "Underground Medecin." For the Crescents were also where most of Manchester's bathtub speed was manufactured.

Pills feature in "Bingo-Master's Break-Out!," the title track of the Fall's debut EP, not as a way of coping with soul-crushing mundanity, but of escaping from it permanently. The bingo-master, a man whose job is organizing other people's fun, looks into his future, sees only encroaching baldness and further years wasted "in numbers and rhyme," and opts to end it all with a handful of pills washed down with booze. Smith had visited a bingo hall with his parents and was stunned by how regimented and mechanical this incredibly popular form of British working-class recreation was. The evening's mind-dulling entertainment formed a grim mirror image of the daytime's labor. "It wasn't like a place you'd go for your leisure, it was a glorified works canteen," Smith told *Sounds*. "And people were going there straight from work."

Macabre and hilarious, "Bingo-Master's Break-Out!" typified the Fall's fish-eye-lens view of Northern working-class life. Bramah says that the Fall's songs came from their "sitting in pubs, munching magic mushrooms, and observing the daft things people did." In the grand tradition of British misanthropic satire, Smith's invective seems to come from somewhere outside the class system, a vantage point from which everything seems equally absurd and ludicrous—the privileged upper class and middle-management bourgeoisie with their pretensions and illusions, for sure, but also the proles with their inverted snobberies, escapist pleasures, and grumbling acquiescence to the way things are and forever shall be. As unsparing toward his own people as everybody else, Smith's withering gaze scanned society up

and down and found only grotesquerie. In many ways he resembled the “judge penitent” of Camus’s *The Fall* who weighs up everybody’s failings and hypocrisies, his own included. In the song “New Puritan,” Smith declared, “Our decadent sins/Will reap discipline.”

In the early days, the Fall were regarded as heavy-duty politicos. Songs like “Hey! Fascist” and “Race Hatred” got them briefly tagged as New Wave Commies, a misunderstanding partly based on the fact that bassist Friel had once been a member of the Young Communist League. But while Baines says she and Smith did attend “loads of political meetings—things like the International Marxists,” she points out, “We were never members, just interested in checking out the range of opinions.” Baines was also a forthright feminist who’d rejected her Catholic upbringing while still at her girls-only school, because the Bible was so anti woman. “There was a lot going on in Manchester with feminism then—the first rape crisis centers and women’s refuges, abortion rights were hotly fought for—and we were right in the middle of that.”

In 1977 and 1978 the Fall played numerous Rock Against Racism benefits, but like many postpunk groups they became disenchanted with RAR’s treatment of music as a mere vehicle for politicizing youth. They soon distanced themselves from anything remotely resembling agitprop or right-on trendy leftism. Instead, Smith developed a way of writing about “the real world” that was increasingly elliptical and nonlinear. Equally important as subject matter was rock culture. Songs like “It’s the New Thing,” “Music Scene,” “Mere Pseud Mag Ed,” “Look Know,” and “Printhead” skewered the platitudes and pieties of hipsters. In interview and song alike, Mark E. Smith took on the role of metapop specter, stalking the periphery of the postpunk scene and maintaining a scathing running commentary on the failings of the Fall’s peer groups.

One of Smith’s most famous pronouncements was his description of the Fall in “Crap Rap 2” as “Northern white crap that talks back.” “I don’t fully understand it myself,” Smith admitted to *Sounds* when asked about that line. “It’s meant to be, like, mystical.” The attitude still came through clear enough, the basic Fall stance of surly intransigence. In a way, Smith just added a kind of shamanic mystique to standard-issue Mancunian cockiness, which is itself a sort of residual attitude from the city’s industrial heyday, when Manchester “kept all the machinery going for the rest of the country,” as Baines puts it.

Being proud of the city’s industrial might, though, didn’t mean that one sided with the factory boss. Throughout the nineteenth century, Manchester was a stronghold for working-class radicalism, from the machinery-wrecking Luddites to the vote-demanding

Chartists. Friedrich Engels, coauthor of *The Communist Manifesto*, lived in Manchester for a time and was inspired to write *The Condition of the Working Class in England* by his observations of the textile industry there.

Punishing work in hostile conditions forged a kind of Mancunian mettle, tough as new nails. “Fiery Jack,” the Fall’s fourth single, offered a vivid portrait of one of Manchester’s finest sons, the hard-bitten and indomitable product of five generations of industrial life. Fiery Jack is a forty-five-year-old pub stalwart who’s spent three decades on the piss, ignoring the pain from his long-suffering kidneys. Surviving on meat pies and other revolting bar snacks, Jack is an inexhaustible font of anecdotes and rants. The music sounds stubborn, incorrigible, a white-line rush of rockabilly drums and rhythm guitar like sparks shooting out of a severed cable. Speed might just be another of Jack’s poisons, judging by his refusal to go “back to the slow life” and lines such as “Too fast to write/I just burn burn burn.” Based on older blokes Smith had met in Manchester pubs, Jack was “the sort of guy I can see myself as in twenty years,” he told *Sounds*. “These old guys have more guts than these kids will ever have.” Jack was the lad who grew old, battered by hard work and harder pleasure, but who never gave up and never gave in.

WHEREAS THE FALL seemed to spring into existence fully formed and with an utterly distinctive sound, Joy Division took a while to find their identity. They began life as Warsaw, a fairly undistinguished punk-inflected hard-rock band. Listen to the early demos that survive, squint one’s ears, and a gleam of difference is audible. It’s a metallic quality, with “metal” referring to both the material substance and the musical genre. “Digital,” the group’s first recording as Joy Division, sounds not a million miles from Black Sabbath’s “Paranoid”: a dark, fast pummel, a full-tilt dirge fusing pace and ponderousness.

Sabbath’s Bill Ward claimed that “most people live on a permanent down but just aren’t aware of it. We’re trying to express it for people.” Ian Curtis’s harrowed voice and words offered an equally “heavy” vision of life. Looking at his lyrics, certain words and images appear over and over: coldness, pressure, darkness, crisis, failure, collapse, loss of control. There are countless scenarios of futile exertion, purposes “turned sour,” and doom “closing in.” Above all, there are terminal words, endless *ends* and *finals*. But Joy Division’s reference points were less lumpen than heavy metal’s. Instead of pulp superhero comics or bastardized blues, it was J. G. Ballard and Bowie’s *Low*. Rather than the invulnerable “Iron Man,” Sumner’s guitar evokes the

wounded, penetrable metal of *Crash*, twisted and buckled, splayed and torn.

Joy Division's originality really became apparent as the songs got slower. Shedding punk's fast, distortion-thickened sound, the music grew stark and sparse. Peter Hook's bass carried the melody, Bernard Sumner's guitar left gaps rather than filling up the group's sound with dense riffage, and Steve Morris's drums seemed to circle the rim of a crater. Curtis intoned from "a lonely place" at the center of this empty expanse. All that space in Joy Division's music was something critics immediately noticed. It would have been hard to miss, even if Curtis hadn't put up signposts in the form of titles like "Interzone" or lyrical references to "no-man's-land."

Although the initial inspiration was "Warszawa," a haunting instrumental on side two of *Low*, the group's original name, Warsaw, was chosen mainly because of the Polish capital's associations with World War II (the uprising of the Jewish ghetto, the razing of the Old City) and the Eastern Bloc (Soviet totalitarianism, the cold war). Like the word "Berlin," "Warsaw" conjured mind's-eye imagery of desolate urban space: a city rebuilt rapidly after wartime devastation, all spartan apartment high-rises, government ministries straight out of Orwell's *1984*, and disquietingly wide streets designed to allow for the passage of Russian tanks. But the band's replacement name had even more dismal connotations. "Joy Division" came from *House of Dolls*, a 1965 novel written by a concentration camp survivor who took the pen name Ka-Tzetnik 135633 from the prisoner number branded on his arm. The novel is written from the point of view of a fourteen-year-old girl sent to Auschwitz's "Camp Labor Via Joy," the "joy division" where females were kept as sex slaves for German troops fresh from the Russian front.

Steve Morris argues that the name indicated identification with the victims rather than the tormentors. "It was the flip side of it, rather than being the master race, the oppressed rather than the oppressor." Sumner has often claimed that the group's obsession with Nazism came from their desire to keep alive memories of the Second World War and the sacrifices of their parents' and grandparents' generations in the struggle of good against evil. Still, there's no doubt that Joy Division played with fire when it came to dabbling in Nazi imagery. On the minialbum *Short Circuit: Live at the Electric Circus*—a document of the Manchester punk scene—Ian Curtis can be heard screaming at the crowd, "You all forgot Rudolf Hess!" In June 1978, the group self-released their first record, the EP *An Ideal for Living*. The sleeve featured a drawing of a blond-haired Hitler Youth drummer boy and a photograph of a German storm trooper pointing a gun at a small Polish Jewish boy. In the early days, Sumner used the Germanic-

sounding stage name Albrecht, and the group's image—gray shirts, very short hair, thin ties—had a monochrome austerity and discipline redolent of totalitarianism.

At a time when neo-Nazis were marching through the streets of Britain's major cities and racial attacks were on the rise, there were those who believed that *any* ambiguity in one's allegiances was irresponsible. According to Morris, the flak the group received ("We knew we weren't Nazis but we kept on getting letters in *NME* slating us for harboring Eichmann in the coal cellar!") just encouraged Joy Division "to keep on doing it, because that's the kind of people we are." But the flirtations went a little further than just a "perverse joke." Years later, Hook and Sumner talked candidly about the fascination with fascism. Sumner enthused about the beauty (the art, architecture, design, even uniforms) that emerged despite "all that hate and all that dominance," while Hook admitted the dark allure of "a certain physical sensation you get from flirting with something like that. We thought it was a very, very strong feeling."

For his part, Curtis's obsession with Germany stemmed partly from the Berlin chic of his glam heroes Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, and David Bowie. He was also intrigued by the mass psychology of fascism, the way a charismatic leader could bewitch an entire population into doing or accepting irrational and monstrous things. The early song "Walked in Line" is about those who just did what they were told, committing crimes in a "hypnotic trance." An explorer of literature's darker precincts, such as Conrad and Kafka, Curtis *enjoyed* contemplating humanity's bottomless capacity for inhumanity. Like Una Baines, he also had a keen interest in mental illness. One of his relatives worked in a psychiatric ward and brought back grim stories, while Curtis himself briefly worked in a rehabilitation center for people with mental and physical disabilities. As Deborah Curtis notes dryly in her memoir about her marriage to the singer, "It struck me that all Ian's spare time was spent reading and thinking about human suffering."

Curtis's doomy baritone and obsession with the dark side often got him compared to Jim Morrison. Indeed, the Doors were one of the singer's favorite bands. Joy Division's "Shadowplay" is like "L.A. Woman" turned inside out, the latter's rolling, virile propulsion reduced to a bleak transit across a city that could hardly be less like sunbaked Southern California. Gaping yet claustrophobic, the space in Joy Division's music is the opposite of the utopian kind you find in sixties rock: the freeway-as-frontier imagery and "explode into space" euphoria of Steppenwolf's "Born to Be Wild," the outward-bound cosmic surge of Pink Floyd and Hendrix.

All that space in Joy Division's music needed room to breathe.

Playing small clubs, they were “a bit of a racket,” says John Keenan, the Leeds promoter behind the Futurama festivals of postpunk music. “But the next time I saw them, in a big hall, with a bit of echo, it suddenly made sense. They weren’t a club band, they were meant to play stadiums.”

Joy Division first hooked up with Factory Records’s house producer Martin Hannett when they recorded two tracks for *A Factory Sample*, the inaugural release for the label that would soon become Manchester’s leading independent record company. Producing the band’s subsequent recordings for Factory, Hannett dedicated himself to capturing and intensifying Joy Division’s eerie spatiality. Punk records typically simulated the boxy, in-your-face sound of the small-club gig. The fast tempos and fuzzed-out guitars suited the tinny, two-dimensional sound reproduction of the seven-inch single. A sixties character, a “head” who loved psychedelia and dub, Hannett believed punk was sonically conservative precisely because of its refusal to exploit the recording studio’s capacity to create space. It was music for teenagers with transistor radios and cheap record players, not adults with proper stereo systems.

Factory’s Tony Wilson talked of Hannett’s genius in terms of synesthesia, a rare condition in which the senses are confused. “He could see sound, shape it, and rebuild it.” This “really visual sense that most people just don’t have” was enhanced by Hannett’s being a major pothead. Hash, he told one interviewer, is “good for the ears.” Hannett also dug the psychogeography of urban space, talking about how “deserted public places, empty office blocks...give me a rush.”

“Digital,” Hannett’s first Joy Division production, derived its name from his favorite sonic toy, the AMS digital-delay line. Hannett used the AMS and other digital effects coming onto the market in the late seventies to achieve “ambience control.” He could wrap a song, or individual instruments within a track, inside a particular spatial “aura,” as if they came from imaginary rooms with real dimensions and sound reflections. Hannett talked of creating “sonic holograms” through layering “sounds and reverbs.” His most distinctive use of the AMS digital delay, however, was pretty subtle. He applied a microsecond delay to the drums that was barely audible yet created a sense of enclosed space, a vaulted sound as if the music were recorded in a mausoleum. Hannett also created near subliminal sounds that shimmered like wraiths in the innermost recesses of Joy Division records.

Punk bands, reversing the superslick seventies-megarock style of recording musicians separately and then reuniting them at the mixing board, were often recorded playing together in real time. Hannett took it back the other way to an extreme degree. He demanded totally

clean and clear “sound separation,” not just for individual instruments but for each separate element of the drum kit. “Typically on tracks he considered to be potential singles, he’d get me to play each drum on its own to avoid any bleed-through of sound,” sighs Morris. “First the bass-drum part. Then the snare part. Then the hi-hats.” Not only was this tediously protracted, it created a mechanistic, disjointed effect. “The natural way to play drums is all at the same time. So I’d end up with my legs black and blue because I’d be tapping on them quietly to do the other bits of the kit that he wasn’t recording.” This dehumanizing treatment—essentially turning Morris into a drum machine—was typical of Hannett’s rather high-handed attitude toward musicians. But this had beneficial results aesthetically, because the disjointedness actually added to the music’s stark, alienated feel. You can hear it on one of the high points of the Hannett/Joy Division partnership, “She’s Lost Control,” with its mechanodisco drum loop, tom toms like ball bearings, bassline like steel cable undulating in strict time, and guitar like a contained explosion, as if the track’s only real rock-out element has been cordoned off.

Hannett loved to play mind games with musicians to create tension. On one occasion, he forced Morris to dismantle his entire drum kit because of an unwanted rattling sound (which Hannett may either have imagined or simply invented). According to Chris Nagle, the studio engineer on Joy Division’s debut album, *Unknown Pleasures*, and the singles “Transmission” and “Atmosphere,” Hannett would sometimes go to sleep under the mixing board in order to deliberately “create a state of panic. Then he’d just impose his will on people and they’d go back into the studio really wound up.” Nagle’s diabetes became another weapon for Hannett. He’d turn the studio air-conditioning to its coldest setting, supposedly on Nagle’s behalf. “We’d literally be shivering,” says Morris. Hannett wanted to actively discourage the musicians from sticking around after they’d laid down their parts so he could have free rein with the material. The arctic temperature in Strawberry Studios seems to have seeped into Joy Division’s music. Listening to *Unknown Pleasures*, you can almost see Curtis’s breath forming condensation in the cold air.

At the time, Joy Division hated what Hannett did to their music. *Unknown Pleasures* sounded drained and emaciated to their ears. They would rather have had something closer to the full-on assault of their live performances. Hannett had used one of his favorite devices, the Marshall Time Modulator, to deliberately suppress the guitars and other instruments. “It just made things sound smaller,” says Morris. “A big tom-tom riff of mine would come out sounding like coconuts being hit with matchsticks!” Yet without Hannett’s denuded production, *Unknown Pleasures* would not have been such a strikingly wintry

soundscape.

Released in June 1979, *Unknown Pleasures* caught the eye as well as the ear. The cover, designed by Factory's art director Peter Saville, was a matte-black void apart from a small scientific diagram of rippling lines, whose crinkled crests and sharp slopes resemble the outlines of a mountain range. Bernard Sumner found the diagram in the *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of Science*. It's a Fourier analysis of one hundred consecutive light spasms emitted by the pulsar CP 1919. Left behind when a massive sun exhausts its fuel and collapses in on itself, pulsars are highly electromagnetic and emit regular flashes of intense energy, like a lighthouse in the pitch-black cosmos. Was this how Ian Curtis was beginning to see himself, as a star sending out a signal, a beacon in the darkness? Could he possibly have known that pulsars belong to a distinct class of heavenly bodies known as *misanthropic* or *isolated* neutron stars?

People started to tune in to the signal. The slow-burning success of *Unknown Pleasures* and the hypnotic single "Transmission" gave Joy Division an increasingly obsessive following, nicknamed the "Cult With No Name" and, according to stereotype, consisting of intense young men dressed in gray overcoats. Joy Division understood the power and attraction of mystique from the start (the text on *An Ideal for Living* declared, "This is not a concept EP, it is an enigma"). The band's refusal to do interviews (after some early bad experiences) only helped to enhance their aura. The cult expanded through the second half of 1979 as Joy Division played more prestigious gigs, performing high on the bill at John Keenan's Futurama festival and supporting (and upstaging) Buzzcocks on the latter's U.K. tour.

Joy Division's next single, the breathtaking "Atmosphere," would surely have given the group their first hit had it come out on Factory. Instead, the band gave it to the obscure, ultra-artistic French label Sordide Sentimental, who put it out in March 1980 as a tiny limited-edition release under the title *Licht und Blindheit*. With its vast drumscape, permafrost synths, and cascading chimes, "Atmosphere" sounds like some dream collaboration between Nico and Phil Spector. The cover image on the original Sordide Sentimental release—a hooded monk, his back turned to the viewer, stalking a snow-covered alpine peak—captures the moment when a certain religiosity began to gather around Joy Division.

"Possessed," is how the normally dry and sardonic Hannett described Curtis in an interview with Jon Savage. "It was me who said 'touched by the hand of God,' to a Dutch magazine. He was one of those channels for the gestalt, the only one I bumped into in that period. A lightning conductor." But you don't need to wax mystical to see Curtis as a seerlike figure, someone whose private pain somehow

worked as a prism for the wider culture, refracting the malaise and anguish of Britain in the late seventies.

The private pain was pretty specific stuff, though—grown-up problems like a failing marriage, adultery, and illness. Curtis had fallen out of love with his wife just as they were having their first child, and he'd become embroiled in an affair with a glamorous, demanding Belgian woman named Annik Honoré. If all these conflicted emotions weren't enough, Curtis also had to deal with epilepsy. Strangely, he'd been dancing onstage in a twitchy, convulsive style that resembled an epileptic fit for some time before he suffered his first attack in December 1978. Was he somehow able to channel a latent form of this electrical disorder of the nervous system and transform it into his performance signature? Or had the dancing actually brought on the symptoms? Both Deborah Curtis and Bernard Sumner recall Curtis becoming friendly with an epileptic girl at the rehabilitation center where he worked. The girl later died during a fit and is said to have been the inspiration for "She's Lost Control."

No one knows why Curtis became epileptic, but it's clear that the heavy-duty tranquilizers prescribed to control the condition—downers like phenobarbital and carbamazepine—clouded his head, sapped his spirits, and made him even more vulnerable to the guilt and confusion caused by his infidelity. Hardly surprising, then, with such a pall hanging over the lead singer, that a "strange social climate" (as Hannett put it) surrounded the March 1980 sessions for *Closer*, Joy Division's second album. Hannett described the record as "kabbalistic, locked in its own mysterious world." Sumner recalled staying in the studio all night, sometimes sleeping in the control room. "At night you got a weirder atmosphere." Compared with *Unknown Pleasures*, the textures of *Closer* are more ethereal and experimental. Hook often used a six-string bass for more melody, while Sumner built a couple of synthesizers from DIY kits. Morris had acquired a drum synth and did things like feed it through what he describes as "the shittiest fuzz pedal you can imagine," generating the slaughterhouse of hacking and shearing metal-on-bone noise in the background of "Atrocity Exhibition," *Closer*'s opener.

In typically repressed British manner, neither Curtis's bandmates nor Hannett were able to really talk to the singer about his problems. Yet they appear to have absorbed his pain and recreated it sonically. Listening to *Closer* is like being inside Curtis's head, feeling the awful, down-swirling drag of terminal depression. Side one is all agony: the swarming knives of "Atrocity," the ice shroud glaze of "Isolation," on which Curtis sounds swaddled in a barbiturate haze, his voice mineralized by Hannett's effects. The treadmill motion of "Passover"

feels like the group's batteries are running down. It's followed by the tough, punitive rock of "Colony" and "A Means to an End," on which the drums do finally decelerate like a dying machine.

Closer's second side is somehow more disturbing for its serenity, as though Curtis has stopped struggling altogether. The numb trance and narcotic glide of "Heart and Soul" give way to the alternately desperate and resigned "Twenty Four Hours," its beautiful bass like the pulse of a heavy heart, while Curtis's voice is disturbingly deep, like the microphone is right inside his chest. The mist-wreathed epic colonnades of "The Eternal" conjure an unnerving sense of Curtis's watching his own funeral procession. Finally, there's the insuperable world-weariness of "Decades," *Closer's* closer, with its listless, clip-clop beat and synths that sound eroded and washed-out, like aged Super 8 home movies of happy childhood memories.

Curtis wrote the *Closer* lyrics in a trancelike state, with no editing or rewriting. There are allusions to the dead marriage ("a valueless collection of hopes and past desires," "the sound from broken homes"), to dislocations and a crushing sense of failure ("I'm ashamed of the things I've been put through/I'm ashamed of the person I am"). Most of all, there's fatigue. According to Sumner, Curtis told him: "I feel like there's a big whirlpool and I'm being sucked down into it and there's nothing I can do."

The barbiturate tablets Curtis was taking for his epilepsy were like little doses of death, freezing him from the inside out. "The barbs change people's personality," said fellow Factory artist Vini Reilly, who had his own psychological problems and bonded with Curtis during this period. "You lose a sense of reality. That's what happened and he got further and further out, and so far out he couldn't get back." Songs like "Isolation" and "The Eternal" come from the same lifeless emotional landscapes as Nico's *Desertshore* and *The Marble Index*, cut off from the warm-blooded mainland of human contact and fellowship. The last lyric Curtis ever finished, "In a Lonely Place," featured a death wish reference to "caressing the marble and stone."

In the three-month gap between finishing *Closer* at the end of March and its release in July 1980, Curtis had already attempted suicide with an overdose of pills. On top of everything else, he was depressed by his worsening epilepsy, which interfered with his ability to fulfill his role in the band. On one occasion he had to leave the stage after suffering an attack. Simon Topping, front man of labelmates A Certain Ratio, took his place, resulting in an audience riot. "The doctor was telling him the only way to control epilepsy is to live a really quiet life," says Peter Hook. "No drink, no drugs, no excitement. And here he was the singer in a band that was getting really big."

Despite Curtis's overdose and his deteriorating condition, no real attempts at reducing the band's workload were made. Joy Division's first American tour was in the pipeline. Curtis told some people he wanted to take time off, but in front of his bandmates he feigned excitement. He didn't want to disappoint his comrades or Factory. By this point the label was essentially carried by Joy Division. At Factory's big London showcase at the Moonlight in April 1980, Joy Division played all three nights. They were the big pull that would lure people in to see the label's roster of lesser lights. Yet Curtis must have had severe doubts about being an icon. In "Atrocity Exhibition," he alternates between being the ringmaster of the horror show and the freak entertainment itself, prostituting his own neurosis and twisting his body onstage.

The breaking point came on May 18, 1980. After visiting his estranged wife and asking, unsuccessfully, for her to drop the divorce, Curtis stayed up all night, watching a movie by his favorite director Werner Herzog and listening to Iggy's *The Idiot*. He finally hung himself as "that awful daylight" ("In a Lonely Place") approached.

Curtis's suicide at twenty-three made for instant myth. The sheer commitment of the act confirmed the authenticity of Joy Division's words and music in a way that was quite problematic, entirely logical, and ultimately inevitable. As Curtis always intended, he joined the pantheon of those who lived too intensely and felt too deeply to make it for long in this world of half measures and settling for less. Brushing away the tears, Factory threw itself enthusiastically into building and burnishing the legend. Peter Saville gave the posthumous single "Love Will Tear Us Apart" an exquisite abstract cover that looked like the lustrous marble interior of a cenotaph. *Closer's* sleeve actually featured a photograph taken in a Genoa cemetery, a sculpted tableau of the dead Christ surrounded by grief-stricken mourners.

"Love Will Tear Us Apart" became Joy Division's first U.K. chart hit. Curtis's crooning vocal, Hook's bass, and Sumner's keyboard all trace, in unison, the same shy, crestfallen melody, while Morris's drumming skitters with feathery unrest. On "Love Will Tear" and its savage B-side "These Days," the singer and the music both sound raw and exposed, like they've got no skin. The words are laceratingly candid glimpses into a dying relationship, snapshots of bad sex and broken trust. Although the marriage breakup was only one factor and not widely known, "Love Will Tear Us Apart" was taken as Curtis's suicide note to the public, the official explanation.

MARK E. SMITH ONCE SUGGESTED that there were two kinds of

factory in Manchester: the kind that make dead men, and the kind that live off a dead man. An unfair jibe, but it's true in the sense that Curtis's death sealed Factory's stature forever. It also condemned the label to struggle for years to find a group as weighty and epochal as Joy Division. The two closest contenders on Factory's early roster were A Certain Ratio and Durutti Column.

The Durutti Column was the name Tony Wilson came up with on behalf of guitarist Vini Reilly. Buenaventura Durruti had led a nomadic brigade of revolutionaries during the Spanish Civil War. Wilson was fond of a situationist comic strip called *The Return of the Durutti Column*, which invoked the Catalan anarchist's guerrilla spirit. The military allusion couldn't have been more incongruous for Reilly's fragile music, spun from intricate skeins of guitar fed through an Echoplex and always played with the fingertips, delicate and prismatic like frost on a windowpane. Far from being a soldier, Reilly had gone AWOL from normal life. He suffered from anorexia nervosa, and his music sounded as translucent as you'd expect from someone with almost no flesh. On the second Durutti album, 1981's *LC*, Reilly recorded a tribute to Ian Curtis, but the song, "Missing Boy," could just as easily have been about himself.

Strongly influenced by the Pop Group, whom they'd seen supporting Pere Ubu in 1978, A Certain Ratio's funk noir got a big boost when they recruited a drummer as good as Bruce Smith. Donald Johnson's fatback drumming almost single-handedly prevented the group's nebulous sound from wafting off into the void. Heard best on the early single "Flight," ACR's music worked through the tension between dry funk (rimshot cracks and rattling snares, neurotic bass, itchy rhythm guitar) and dank atmospherics (trumpet that seemed to waft through fog, diffuse smears from a guitar so heavily-effected the instrument sounded more like a synth). At times ACR sounded like Joy Division getting on the good foot. Singer Simon Topping more or less cloned Curtis's baritone drone, while the lyrics hinted at dark drives and shadowy states of consciousness. "ACR had a bizarre sense of fashion—close-cropped hair, baggy khaki shorts," recalls Manchester pop historian Dave Haslam. This look, vaguely redolent of colonialism or the Afrika Corps, lent itself to being misinterpreted as flirting with fascism. Still, the presence of a black man behind the drum kit helped to counteract A Certain Ratio's faintly dodgy aura.

Unconsciously, labels seem to sign bands that closely resemble their most successful act, and Factory's roster was crowded with Joy Division-influenced outfits like Section 25 and Crispy Ambulance. Their weak attempts to establish their own identity were further enfeebled by being given the trademark Factory sound courtesy of Martin Hannett. The producer, meanwhile, sank into heroin addiction,

but still managed to do some of his best work as one half of the Invisible Girls, supplying the music for the genius Mancunian punk poet John Cooper Clarke on albums like the classic *Snap, Crackle [&] Bop*. As for Hook, Sumner, and Morris, they were struggling to find a direction out of the darkness that had claimed Curtis, and chose the distinctly suspect name New Order to signal their desire for a fresh start. But it would be a while before they discovered a new musical direction, thanks to electronic dance music from New York.

Factory dominated Manchester's postpunk scene. The main alternative came from a cluster of activity around an organization called the Manchester Music Collective. The MMC was the brainchild of experimental musicians Trevor Wishart and Dick Witts (who was actually a colleague of Tony Wilson's at Granada TV). Using a grant from a regional branch of the Arts Council, Wishart and Witts rented a basement and turned it into a Monday-night showcase. The Fall played their first gig there, and Joy Division were regular MMC participants. "It gave us somewhere to play, we met other musicians, talked, swapped ideas," Ian Curtis told *NME*. "Also it gave us a chance to experiment in front of people."

"The MMC was a great intervention," recalls Richard Boon. "There was a whole stream of funny little groups who shared equipment—Dislocation Dance, Gay Animals, the Hamsters, and a bunch of groups on the Object Music label, like Spherical Objects, Grow-Up, and Dick Witts's own group, the Passage."

The Passage gave Joy Division a close run for their money at one point, with a string of independent hits like their third album *Degenerates*. Their debut, *Pindrop*, was hailed by Paul Morley in *NME* as a postpunk classic comparable to *Unknown Pleasures*, grappling with the grand themes of "love, power, and fear" in atmospheric, doom-laden music. Formerly a classically trained percussionist, Witts built dense, dramatic arrangements that were stirringly rhythmic but not the least bit rocklike. "We used bell sounds, military sounds like trumpet fanfares, brass and trumpets—anything that suggested things outside rock," says Witts. Matching the epic sound was a thematic loftiness verging on didacticism. "Devils and Angels" railed against organized religion while "XOYO" obliquely explored gender politics.

Witts had originally formed the Passage as a collaboration with Tony Friel, the first member of the Fall to defect from the band. By 1980, every original member of the Fall had been replaced except for Mark E. Smith. Kay Carroll, a psychiatric nurse who befriended Una Baines, started going out with Smith, then took on the job of managing the Fall. The power dynamics shifted. "It became a bit of a Yoko and Lennon scenario," says Bramah. "The girlfriend affirming Mark's genius. Tony left first. He felt he'd invested a lot in the Fall.

He'd come up with the name, and he was the only proper musician in the band." Baines left next, following a mental breakdown triggered in part by the druggie lifestyle she was leading. "I was twenty and had this serious illness. It took me twelve months before I could even speak to people again." Drummer Karl Burns lasted until the end of 1978, and Bramah stuck it out to April 1979. "What initially started out as a collective became a dictatorship," he says. "Mark's a genius, but he made it very hard for me to work with him. The breakup wasn't so much about the music, though, it was more how we were being treated as people on a daily basis."

According to Baines, Smith recruited his new Fall from the group's roadies, who already had a band of their own and were much more pliable. "A word from Mark could decimate them," says Rough Trade's Geoff Travis, who produced the Fall's third studio album, *Grotesque (After the Gramme)*. "They loved him, but were a little bit awed. I remember sitting in a café with him and saying, 'Don't you think it's really weird, Mark, that none of the band speak to you?' One of his sayings was, 'Musicians are the lowest form of life.'"

With Smith literally calling the tune, the Fall embarked upon their most intensely creative stretch, recording a series of visionary albums and brilliant singles, first for Rough Trade and then for the label Kamera. As 1980 progressed they drew level with Joy Division in the race to be Manchester's leading postpunk band, hitting the uppermost reaches of the indie charts with the albums *Totale's Turns* and *Grotesque* and the singles "How I Wrote 'Elastic Man'" and "Totally Wired."

Grotesque offered a modern-day hallucinatory equivalent to William Hogarth's eighteenth-century caricatures of the English lower classes taking their pleasures, an idea pursued further on the Fall's singles of this period like "I'm into CB," a hilarious satire of a hapless ham radio fanatic. For *NME's* Barney Hoskyns, this era of Fall music—bookended by *Grotesque* and the coruscating mini-LP *Slates*—threw the listener into deranging "wastelands of sound without themes, messages, or politics. These records *were* politics, living conjurations of the crass and the grotesque in Northern prole life. What [the Fall's music] implied was that the whole bastion of comfortable working-class traditions—the institutions of barbiturates, boozing, and bingo—could be transformed, could even transform themselves, into a deep cultural revolution." Smith had broached this notion in the liner notes to *Totale's Turns*. Alluding to the Northern circuit of workingmen's clubs where the Fall played early on for lack of other opportunities, he speculated wildly, "Maybe one day a Northern sound will emerge not tied to that death-circuit attitude or merely reiterating movements based in the capital." This fantasy scenario inspired *Grotesque's* epic

closing track, "The N.W.R.A.," which stands for "The North Will Rise Again." "It's just like a sort of document of a revolution that could happen," Smith explained. "Like somebody writing a book about what would have happened if the Nazis had invaded Britain."

Around this time, Smith coined the imaginary genre Country 'n' Northern to distance the Fall from self-consciously experimental bands such as the Pop Group. "We are a very retrogressive band in a lot of ways," he told the zine *Printed Noises*. But even as the Fall's music seemed to get more hillbilly primitive and raw, Smith's lyrics became ever more intractably abstract. His frankly avant-garde torrent of encrypted utterances spliced with found text (the British tabloids were a favorite source of inanities) seemed uncontrollable, spilling onto the Fall's record sleeves, which were daubed with hand-scrawled minirants, cryptic slogans, cartoons, and doodles. Through the sleeve scribbles and songs such as "2nd Dark Age," one could follow a fractured running narrative concerning ex-cabaret artist Roman Totale and his secret-agent son, Joe. Totale, said Smith, was an "underground being...cursed with mystical insight." He also had tentacles, the reason he had to go underground. "It's like his face started *leaking*," Smith sort of explained. The singer cultivated this magical element to counter the prevalent image of the Fall as being all about industrial decay and dole queues. "I am a dreamer sort of person and I resent being associated with realist bands," he said.

Along with the speed and shrooms, tales of cosmic horror fueled Smith's dreams. This short-story genre was pioneered by nineteenth-century gentleman occultists such as M. R. James, Arthur Machen, Algernon Blackwood, and H. P. Lovecraft, all favorites of Smith's. For a band dedicated to stripping away rock's romantic mystifications, the Fall had a surprisingly potent streak of superstition. Smith believed he was attuned to the strange vibrations of certain places and that his writing was clairvoyant. "I used to be psychic but I drank my way out of it," he quipped in 1996. Reading speed freak science-fiction writer Philip K. Dick gave him concepts such as "pre-cog" and "psychic time travel." The latter informed the song "Wings," during which he recruits gremlins and goes back through a "timelock" into the 1860s. A teenage phase of bumping into ghosts inspired songs such as "Spectre vs. Rector" and "Elves," in which Smith shrieks, "The fantastic is in league against me!"

The culmination of the Fall's fascination with the supernatural came with 1982's *Hex Enduction Hour*, half of which was recorded in Iceland, a country where most of the population believes in fairies. The track "Iceland" was improvised in Reykjavik in a studio with lava walls, the band oozing out a dronehaze of two-note piano cycles and banjo that sounded like sitar, topped with incantations from Smith

about casting “runes against your self-soul.” *Hex* is the Fall at their most forbidding and primal. On “Just Step S’Ways,” the group’s two-drummer lineup brings a new polyrhythmic tumultuousness to the Fall’s juggernaut rumble. “Hip Priest” has an almost jazzlike swing, while the guitars on “Who Makes the Nazis?” (the answer, by the way, is “intellectual half-wits”) sound like flint shards hewn from a mountain face.

Hex was “a huge sort of kiss-off to, like, everything,” Smith said. And it’s a record the band never topped. But the Fall carried on, alternating between relatively lackluster phases and periods of renewed inspiration (1985’s *The Wonderful and Frightening World of the Fall* resembled a pop *Hex Enduction Hour*, dreamlike and almost lovely). By then, Smith had honed the media persona that makes him a perennial favorite with interviewers: the classic British contrarian suspicious of do-gooders and improvers, a curmudgeon who scorns trendy humbug and political cant whether it comes from the Left or Right.

Smith’s force of personality is matched only by the force of nature that is Fallmusic. Still going after almost thirty years, they have accumulated a body of work that rivals Bob Dylan’s in sheer size and density. A body of work like a body of water, never ending and ever shifting, its “changing same” ceaselessly churning up scintillating new patterns. You never step in the same river twice, they say, and so it goes with the Fall.

CHAPTER 8

TROBBING GRISTLE'S MUSIC FROM THE DEATH FACTORY

“WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME where I am from, meaning my nationality, I never say British, I reply that I am from Manchester, in England,” Genesis P-Orridge of industrial-music pioneers Throbbing Gristle told band biographer Simon Ford. “It doesn’t mean I am nostalgic about the place. I was created bitter and resentful by Manchester. I learned absolute emptiness from Manchester. It is not a spiritual environment.”

Yet for all the unremitting ugliness and brutality it absorbed from its urban surroundings, there’s a real sense in which industrial music was the second flowering of an authentic psychedelia. Admittedly, on first listen, the punishing noise made by Throbbing Gristle and their offspring seems impossibly remote from the blissed-out, bucolic mystics of 1967. Syd Barrett’s nursery rhyme melodies and children’s storybook imagery, or the wistful arcadian reveries of the Byrds, seem like the total antithesis of TG’s songs, in which innocence figures only as something to be defiled. As for pastoral tranquility, suffice it to say that when TG posed on an idyllic, grassy cliffside overlooking the English Channel for their album *20 Jazz Funk Greats*, it was a sick joke—that particular pasture, Beachy Head, being a favorite leaping point for suicides.

Nonetheless, industrial music shares many things with psychedelia. The primary impulse in both genres is to blow minds through multimedia sensory overload. Almost every industrial band’s live show featured projected cut-up movies and extreme lighting redolent of 1960s happenings and acid tests. Richard H. Kirk of Cabaret Voltaire, who released some of their early “attic tape” material via TG’s label Industrial Records, described his group’s live shows as being “like a bad trip.” Both psychedelia and industrial followed the sonic imperative that “no sound shalt go untreated,” abandoning naturalistic recording in favor of heavy processing, tape loops, and electronic noise. The difference (and what makes industrial an “authentic” psychedelia rather than a mere revival) is that industrial is psychedelia inverted, replacing kissing the sky with gazing vertiginously into the cosmic abyss.

There were also direct historical links between the acid-dazed freaks of the late sixties and the autopsy aesthetes of the late seventies. The flyer for Throbbing Gristle’s 1976 debut show—or “disconcert” as they punningly dubbed it—described the group as “post-psychedelic trash.” This was plain truth. TG evolved out of COUM Transmissions, a taboo-smashing performance art ensemble, but COUM itself had originally started as an absurdist cosmic-rock

group. In 1971, they supported Hawkwind, the leading band on Britain's "post-psychedelic" underground. Looking at pictures of Genesis P-Orridge circa 1969, he resembles no one so much as Neil the Hippie from *The Young Ones*, with the same droopy, sad-sack expression and long, lank locks. As it happens, his real name is Neil—Neil Megson. And late as 1979 the list of his musical favorites (the Doors, Pearls Before Swine, Fugs, Beefheart, Zappa) fit the classic profile of a head.

In 1966, the sixteen-year-old P-Orridge organized a happening at his Solihull private school after reading newspaper accounts of London's early acid freak-outs. A few years later, he joined the art commune Transmedia Explorations, an offshoot of Exploding Galaxy, which had been renowned for its "Kinetic Theater" performances at psychedelic raves like UFO. "Transmedia" referred to the in-vogue notion of a new form of "total art" involving the creation of "experiences" through synergizing different art forms and smashing down barriers between performer and spectator. More striking, though, was Transmedia's communal lifestyle. Routines and habits, roles and expectations, were deliberately disrupted, with members sleeping in a different bed each night, selecting clothing out of a communal chest every morning, and eating meals at odd times.

This quest for some kind of authentic, pure self via a grueling regime of deconditioning became the hallmark of everything P-Orridge did in art and life. "We need to search for methods to break the preconceptions, modes of unthinking acceptance and expectations that make us, within our constructed behavior patterns, so vulnerable to Control," he wrote years later, borrowing Burroughs's near mystical concept of "Control" as this all-pervasive power reaching inside the fibers of our consciousness. COUM and Throbbing Gristle both aimed to set off "psychic detonations that negate Control."

After his Transmedia adventures, P-Orridge returned to the dreary Northern city of Hull, where he'd been an undergraduate studying social administration and philosophy, and formed his own arts lab collective, COUM Transmissions. He fell for a flower child, Christine Carol Newby, who moved into COUM's communal headquarters in a Hull warehouse and soon renamed herself Cosey Fanni Tutti. COUM started as a rock band of sorts, making up music on the spot, undeterred by lack of grounding in improvisational technique, using broken violins and prepared piano as well as conventional rock instruments like drums and electric bass. Inspired by John Cage's writing and by primitivists like the Fugs and the Velvet Underground, P-Orridge believed that "the future of music lies in nonmusicians." Gradually, the chaotic gigs got more theatrical and "environmental," as first costumes and props, then full-blown installations were added.

P-Orridge and Tutti realized they could get grants from the Arts Council if they described what they did as performance art rather than rock.

Starting in July 1972 with an event called *The Alien Brain*, COUM staged a series of increasingly outlandish and shocking performances at art galleries and mixed-media festivals across Britain and Europe. An important predecessor for COUM was Fluxus, an international art movement of the 1960s whose work combined elements of neo-Dada, Zen, and pranksterism, often with a confrontational performance art aspect. P-Orridge talked of admiring Fluxus's "running battle and commentary with art itself." Another sixties touchstone for COUM was the Vienna Aktionists and their ritualistic feats of abjection and self-mutilation. Typical components of a COUM performance included P-Orridge placing severed chicken heads on top of his penis and masturbating, or P-Orridge and Tutti engaging in simultaneous anal and vaginal sex using a double-pronged dildo. Various combinations of soiled tampons, maggots, black eggs, feathers, and syringes full of milk, blood, or urine figured as props. For instance, P-Orridge might stick a hypodermic into his testicle and then inject the blood into a black egg. Or for a *pièce de résistance*, he might give himself a blood-and-milk enema and then fart out the liquid, splattering the gallery floor.

By the end of 1973, COUM had moved to London. Their new headquarters was the basement of an abandoned factory in the East End. Early the following year, they acquired a new member, Peter Christopherson, nicknamed "Sleazy" because he was most interested in COUM's "fab and kinky" sexual extremism. Sleazy worked as an assistant designer for Hipgnosis, famed creators of lavish artwork for prog-rock groups like Pink Floyd. This was another indication of industrial's connections to post-psychedelic music, as was the arrival in 1975 of Chris Carter, the fourth member of what would soon become Throbbing Gristle. Carter's road-to-Damascus experience was seeing Pink Floyd in 1968 while tripping on LSD. Rather than pick up an instrument, though, he started a light-show business. Later, as a fan of kosmik Krautrockers Tangerine Dream, he got into synthesizers.

Increasingly worried that COUM were being stifled by acceptance (they'd received coverage in art journals and invitations to perform all over Europe), P-Orridge decided it was time for a strategic shift into the world of pop culture. He wanted to find an audience more likely to be both genuinely challenged *and* galvanized to action by COUM's shock effects and radical ideas. P-Orridge was also captivated by the Warholesque notion of using fame, hype, and controversy themselves as an artistic medium.

Founded in September 1975, Throbbing Gristle threw themselves

into the project of conceptualization and sonic research. During the week, Carter, a technical whiz, built speakers, effects units, and synthesizer modules. He cobbled together a unique gizmo for Sleazy to play. Nicknamed the Gristle-izer, it was a sort of *musique concrète* mechanism or primitive sampler. Its one-octave keyboard triggered an array of cassette machines, each loaded with found sounds ranging from TV and movie dialogue to everyday conversations surreptitiously recorded by a roving Sleazy. The group's own vocals were heavily processed, with Carter feeding them through a chorus echo that allowed him to speed them up and slow them down, or make them sound slimy or wobbly. Carter also adapted the conventional instruments like the bass and guitar, feeding them through relays of multiple effects. All of these treatments transformed the guitar and bass into sound-synthesizing machines. Unlike with proper synthesizers, though, extracting noise from the guitar and bass involved an element of hands-on physicality, and this gave TG's sound a uniquely pummeled and percussive feel.

It seems no coincidence that TG formed in 1975, the same year that Lou Reed released the infamous *Metal Machine Music*. But where Reed talked of his intricate tapestries of white noise as a form of modern classical composition, TG's approach was more "rock," in the literal sense of wanting to rock the listener to the core. Their quest was to create a total-body experience, immersive and assaultive. They jettisoned songs, melody, and groove in favor of the overwhelming physical *force* of sound itself. "People think music's just for the ears, they forget it goes into every surface of the body, the pores, the cells, it affects the blood vessels," P-Orridge argued. The group's interest in "metabolic music" led them to investigate military research into the use of infrasound as a nonlethal weapon, where certain frequencies trigger vomiting, epileptic seizures, and even involuntary defecation. TG's own basement became a "chaotic research lab," with P-Orridge and Carter exploring the perceptual and physical effects of high and low frequencies, distortion, and extreme volume, using themselves as guinea pigs. P-Orridge recalled, "We had moments when we had tunnel vision, couldn't walk or stand up straight and so on from certain frequencies we hit."

The whole band was very much an experiment, a conceptual exercise in seeing if they could be accepted as a rock band while pushing rock's boundaries of form and content to the absolute limits. In one interview, P-Orridge recalled the steps in the band's initial conceptualization process. "Let's give it a really inappropriate name ['throbbing gristle' being Yorkshire slang for an erect penis]. Let's not have a drummer because rock bands have drummers. Let's not learn how to play music. Let's put in a lot of *content*—in terms of the words

and the ideas. So normally a band would be music, skill, style and all those other things. We threw away all the usual parameters for a band and said, 'Let's have content, authenticity and energy. Let's refuse to look like or play like anything that's acceptable as a band and see what happens.'"

Throbbing Gristle's official public launch took place in October 1976 at the opening party for *Prostitution*, a COUM exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts that the group saw as their swan song. COUM's last gasp turned out to be their finest hour, at least in terms of media attention. Located in the heart of London—a short stroll from Buckingham Palace, the House of Commons, and the National Gallery—the ICA represented a threshold, the place where art's radical fringe collided with high culture. The centerpiece of *Prostitution* was photo documentation of Tutti's work as a model in some forty porn magazines. This, plus the exhibition of used tampons, made *Prostitution* a perfect flash point for growing public concern about the subsidized avant-garde, what the Arts Council was supporting with taxpayers' money at a time of recession and public-spending cuts. Conservative politician Nicholas Fairbairn denounced *Prostitution* as "a sickening outrage.... Public money is being wasted here to destroy the morality of our society. These people are wreckers of civilization!" Taken aback, COUM found themselves Public Enemy Number One in the newspapers, the subject of apoplectic headlines and smear stories in the tabloids and a symbol for declining standards in the more sober newspapers. The furor even reached the House of Commons, where questions were raised by members of Parliament.

The *Prostitution* controversy rivaled the media panic about the Sex Pistols' swearing on TV some months later. Some soon-to-be-famous punks attended Throbbing Gristle's ICA gig, but P-Orridge and crew were skeptical about punk's credentials as radical music. To them, punk was too rock, too *musical* in fact. P-Orridge believed that *Sniffin' Glue's* exhortation "Here's three chords, now start a band" conceded far too much to traditional musicality. "It starts with chords. They're saying, 'Be like everyone else, you gotta learn to play.' You can start with *no chords*. Why not just say, 'Form a band and it doesn't matter what it sounds like or whether you even make a noise, if you just stand there silent for an hour, just do what you want?'" TG, he underlined frequently, was "anti-music." During one gig in early 1977, P-Orridge poured scorn on the jeering punks in the audience: "You can't have anarchy and have *music*." During the cacophonous performance, Tutti bared her breasts and Genesis poured fake blood over his head. He then invited half a dozen members of the audience onstage and handed them instruments.

P-Orridge believed that "you should approach any instrument the

way a child will.” He picked the bass because it was the instrument he was least qualified to play. Tutti, likewise, chose the guitar because it was the one she was least attracted to. She never learned to play chords, but used a slide to generate hair-raising glissandi or just bashed the strings, using the guitar as a rhythm instrument and—via a battery of effects—a source of abstract noise.

Apart from the rhythm tracks built by Chris Carter, TG songs were written live, in the studio or onstage, with only the vaguest musical guidelines discussed in advance. P-Orridge generally improvised his words after briefly consulting the band about possible lyrical topics. The song “Persuasion,” for instance, was composed during a gig at Notting Hill’s squat venue Centro Iberico. Just before going onstage, P-Orridge asked Christopherson what he should sing about today and received the reply “persuasion,” one of Sleazy’s obsessions being how people are cajoled into doing (sexual) things against their will. P-Orridge ad-libbed lyrics about a guy pressuring his spouse to be photographed for the “Reader’s Wives” section of a porn mag.

There were upsides and downsides to TG’s fixation on spontaneous composition/combustion. A practice continued from their performance art days, TG exhaustively documented every show and eventually released all of them. Listening to these live recordings, you encounter passages of astonishing intensity—molten, distended sound-shapes like solar gas festooning off the surface of a star, strafing streaks and zaps from some audio battle zone. But inevitably TG developed an arsenal of riffs and tricks—gouging bass blasts, pounding surges, upward-careening arcs—as predictable as any musical language. As with free jazz and improv, for all the commotion and turmoil, the palette of sound colors could start to feel somewhat samey.

Sixties free-music outfits like AMM, a Zen-influenced British group that reputedly inspired Pink Floyd, were implicitly spiritual, yearning to recover the lost “totality.” Stripped of romanticism, TG’s music simulated the soul-destroying rhythms of Fordist mass production. Carter compared the group to a “sound assembly line.” TG named their label Industrial Records. The word “industrial” signaled the production-line quality of the way they churned out noise. “Records” had a dual meaning, signifying not just LPs and singles but the idea of files and documents. TG saw their releases as a series of dispassionate reports on “the savage realities of fading capitalism.”

P-Orridge also saw TG as a form of science fiction. “We’re writing about the future by looking at today,” he proclaimed. Although P-Orridge cut off his hair in 1977 as a symbolic act of severance with the hippie era, the “classic” TG of “Slug Bait” and “Hamburger Lady” actually sounds a bit like a corroded, ailing Tangerine Dream, cosmic

rock for a universe in its winding-down phase. TG also made some pure, unabashed space music, such as “After Cease to Exist,” which took up the whole second side of their debut album, *Second Annual Report*, with its diffuse wafts of wavery-toned, early Floyd/Syd Barrett guitar.

During the late seventies, the East London borough of Hackney, where TG lived and worked, was one of the most deprived inner-city areas in the U.K., with bad housing, rising unemployment, and endemic street crime. It was a fertile environment for the neofascist National Front, who maintained a strong presence throughout much of East London. This backdrop of resurgent fascism added an edge to Throbbing Gristle’s ambiguous fascination with Nazism. Calling their studio the Death Factory was partly a nod to nearby London Fields, where victims of the plague had been buried, but its more obvious evocation was the concentration camps. Industrial Records’s logo was a deceptively benign-looking leafy lane with what looked like a factory at the end of it. In fact, it was a photo of Auschwitz taken by P-Orridge during a trip to visit friends in Poland. Holocaust imagery featured on the covers of the singles “Subhuman” (a towering mound of human skulls) and “Distant Dreams (Part Two)” (walking frames taken from the elderly and infirm before they were shunted into the death chamber). Genesis P-Orridge explained this morbid obsession in an *NME* interview, arguing that TG’s slogan “Music from the Death Factory” was “a metaphor for society and the way life is. Everybody lives in their own concentration camp. What we’re saying is, be careful, because it’s not far from one to the other.” Yet even as they made wildly melodramatic and tasteless generalizations, Throbbing Gristle also flirted with fascist imagery. The group’s logo was based on the “England Awake” lightning flash insignia of Sir Oswald Mosely’s British Union of Fascists.

TG constantly teetered on the edge between an anguished awareness of horror and an unwholesome obsession—bordering on identification—with evil. This ambiguity was most pronounced in the group’s use of pedophile imagery. “Very Friendly,” one of TG’s first songs, concerns the midsixties exploits of Manchester’s Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, the infamous “Moors Murderers” who sexually tortured and murdered children (although P-Orridge’s lyrics in this song focus on the killing of a homosexual young man). *D.o.A: The Third and Final Report of Throbbing Gristle*, their second album, was covered in dubious imagery of prepubescent girls, including an inset photograph of a blond-haired girl reclining on a fur rug with her underwear showing. On the single “We Hate You (Little Girls),” P-Orridge practically foams at the mouth about loathing “your little curls...and your little breasts.” P-Orridge saw his lyrics as a continuation of the way the

Velvet Underground had expanded rock songwriting to take on taboo areas such as sadomasochism and heroin. Ideas of the criminal as artist and psychopathology as freedom also had a long pedigree stretching back to De Quincey, via Bataille, Dostoyevsky, and the Marquis de Sade. In *Bomb Culture*, his classic 1968 account of the emergence of the British counterculture, Jeff Nuttall pinpointed the Moors Murders as a pivotal moment. The demon lovers' "beyond belief" crimes convinced many bohemians that society was going insane, while others recognized that Brady, a de Sade fan, put into gruesome practice such radical art maxims as "Take your desires for reality" and "Everything is possible and nothing is forbidden."

In this spirit, TG's gigs were sadistic assaults on their audiences, not just barrages of noise, but of lighting, too (convulsive strobes, high-power halogen lamps aimed in people's faces). Once audiences start to expect an extreme experience, though, it's time to flip the script. TG's first major swerve came with the single "United." Following *Second Annual Report*, an ultra-lo-fi affair recorded using a Sony tape recorder, a single condenser microphone, and a home-stereo cassette, "United" was almost glossy enough to pass for pop. This disco-inspired song designed "for people to fall in love to" (according to the Industrial press release) might have been chart material if not for its slightly defective groove and P-Orridge's dribbly vocals. "United" was the first in a series of danceable electropop tracks somewhere between Giorgio Moroder and Cabaret Voltaire, including the pulsating pornodisco of "Hot on the Heels of Love" (featuring Cosey's breathy whisper) and the eerie, shimmering propulsion of "Adrenalin" and its flip side, "Distant Dreams (Part Two)."

In a typical TG twist, "United" reappeared on *D.o.A.* sped up so fast that its four minutes were reduced to sixteen seconds of bat-squeaky treble. *D.o.A.* confounded expectations further. It contained archetypal TG songs like "Hamburger Lady" (a nauseous churn of whimpering, agonized sound inspired by the true story of a burn victim unrecognizably charred from the waist up) but also "solo" tracks like the Abba-meets-Kraftwerk rhapsody of Chris Carter's "AB/7A" and P-Orridge's unexpectedly plaintive and personal "Weeping," made using four different types of violin. The latter is industrial music's equivalent to Fleetwood Mac's intraband breakup anthem "Go Your Own Way," its inspiration being Cosey Fanny Tutti's dumping of P-Orridge for Chris Carter. In "Weeping," the line "you didn't see me swallowing my tablets" refers to the heartbroken P-Orridge's suicide attempt in November 1978, when he downed a huge quantity of antidepressants and steroid tablets before going onstage at the Cryptic One Club and woke up in intensive care.

As the rift within TG widened, P-Orridge spent more and more

time with Monte Cazazza, an extremist performance artist from San Francisco who had become a sort of unofficial fifth member of the band, and a real soul mate/mentor to P-Orridge. They'd first made contact through the mail art circuit, which involved sending people handcrafted, intricately designed works through the postal system (P-Orridge liked to mail Cazazza dead animals). Early in TG's existence, Cazazza helped the group with conceptualization and strategy. He even coined the term "industrial music"—"sort of as a wisecrack originally, 'industrial music for industrial people,'" Cazazza recalls. "I didn't mean for people to take it so seriously!" The first non-TG release on Industrial Records was Cazazza's 1979 single "To Mom on Mother's Day." Its flip side, "Candyman," concerned a murderer of boys called Dean Corll who ran a candy factory in Texas.

Cazazza spent much of 1979 in England, bolstering P-Orridge's damaged morale. An avid reader of survivalist literature and books about weaponry, Cazazza turned TG on to military imagery. The group started wearing camouflage gear. Their April 1979 shows in Derby and Sheffield began with a sequence sampled from a U.S. Army training tape featuring the distinctive firing sounds of various high-tech weapons, such as grenade launchers, recoil-less rifles, antitank guided missiles, and the flamethrower of an armored personnel carrier. TG had always attracted a certain kind of fan that was genuinely *fanatical*, and P-Orridge began to see the potential for creating a quasi-paramilitary cult. Through Industrial Records's newsletter, he invited fans to become TG agents: "Do you want to be a fully equipped Terror Guard? Ready for action? Assume Power Focus. NOTHING SHORT OF A TOTAL WAR. NUCLEAR WAR NOW! Then send for a catalogue of available weaponry and regalia, survival kits and clothes."

Around this time, TG embarked upon an experiment in totalitarian psychology that got a little out of hand. Hopped up on survivalist reading matter, the group turned their East London home into a fortress complete with black-painted windows, barbed wire on the garden wall, and a burglar alarm system. A ragged tribe of itinerants had set up camp in the wasteland area behind their street and a neighborhood crime wave appeared to coincide with their arrival. "The police wouldn't do anything for us, so we just decided we had to get these people out of there," says Cazazza. "They were sort of making our lives hell and we fought back in an interesting manner." TG waged sound-war on the unsavory nomads, beaming infrasonic frequencies at their encampment and causing the travelers considerable distress, with symptoms ranging from headaches and anxiety to disrupted sleep patterns and nightmares. Eventually, the travelers packed up their caravans and moved out, convinced the area

was cursed.

The entire episode seems like a consciously undertaken journey into the dark side of paranoid psychology, the protofascist mind-set of scapegoating and persecution. P-Orridge was fully aware that these “gypsies” (as they were popularly, if inaccurately, called by hostile townspeople throughout the U.K.) were uncomfortably close to the Romany wanderers rounded up by the Nazis and exterminated as “vermin.” Recoiling from the squalid lifestyle of the itinerants, TG nicknamed them “subhumans.” Yet two great singles emerged from this playing-with-fire phase. “Subhuman” featured a caravan image on its cover and the couplet “You make me dizzy with your disease/I want to smash you and be at ease.” The other, “Discipline,” came in two different versions. The first, recorded live at Berlin’s S036 club, effectively documents the song’s being written onstage. Given the theme of the day by Tutti a few minutes before the band went on, P-Orridge improvises a series of barked commands. Eleven minutes long, the track starts shakily, then gathers cohesion, as if undergoing the very regimentation process it proposes. The beat sounds like a jackboot moistly pulping the infirm and lowly underfoot, while gruesome shearing sounds conjure an abattoir atmosphere. The later version, recorded in Manchester, is much tighter: P-Orridge declaims, “Are you ready boys? Are you ready girls?/We need some discipline in here,” like a cross between scout leader and führer. On the single’s front cover, TG poses in front of the building that once served as the Third Reich’s Ministry of Propaganda, while the flip side features the slogan “Marching music for psychic youth.”

How did TG, creatures of the sixties and its various liberation movements, succumb to this fascination with fascism? In truth, there’s a slippery zone in which anarchism (or at least that libertine and libertarian brand of anarchism less about workers’ councils than a near solipsistic individualism and a lawless hedonism that brooks no constraints) flips over into a curious appreciation and affinity for certain aspects of Nazism. The meeting point is that whole gnostic side of Nazism that concerned the pagan and primordial. P-Orridge’s investigations into cults and secret societies had led to books that dealt with the Nazi inner circle’s obsessions with occultism, alchemy, and the quest for the Holy Grail.

There was also a potentially totalitarian undercurrent in sixties counterculture itself, latent in its very quest to recover the “lost totality” (as the situationists dubbed it). In their book *Mindfuckers*, journalists Robin Green, David Felton, and David Dalton coined the term “Acid Fascism” to describe the syndrome of figures like Charles Manson. At the end of the sixties, as the utopian energy of flower power turned sinister, Manson was just one of several charismatic

sociopaths who preyed on the drug-damaged children of the counterculture, inducting them into surrogate families where the group-mind was essentially identical to the father figure's warped worldview. TG were fans of Manson's. P-Orridge's obsessions were leading him toward the concept of Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, the cultlike organization he would build around his post-TG band Psychic TV. A Throbbing Gristle gig in Manchester at the end of 1980 was the first to be described as "a Psychic Youth Rally." Earlier that year, P-Orridge signaled his new sense of himself as a shaman with TG's fourth album, *Heathen Earth*, improvised live in the studio with a small audience of friends and associates. Recording a single performance in front of "initiates" was an attempt to create an atmosphere of ritual and ceremony in which magic—"aural and philosophical," stressed P-Orridge—could take place.

By the spring of 1981, the tensions within TG caused by Tutti's breaking up with P-Orridge made the band unworkable. P-Orridge also felt that the group had outlived its usefulness. Throbbing Gristle, he believed, had moved beyond the agrarian blues roots of rock and created a new kind of music (or antimusic) appropriate to postindustrial society. The next step, he told a radio interviewer, was "to go beyond into where man meets space. I don't mean cosmic like Tangerine Dream, I mean inside the head." The very fact that TG had built up a substantial audience that accepted what they did (by *Heathen Earth*, Industrial Records's turnover had reached the point where it was one of the largest independents in the U.K.) was a sign it was time to move on.

Virtually from scratch, TG had constructed a new genre, an entire subcultural field, partly composed of peer groups (like minds already pursuing a similar path, such as Cabaret Voltaire, Non, SPK, Z'ev, Clock DVA, some of whom released records on Industrial) and partly of outfits directly catalyzed by TG (not just in the U.K. but in places as far afield as Yugoslavia, Australia, and Japan). The remarkable thing about Throbbing Gristle's legacy is that they almost single-handedly created one of the most enduring and densely populated fields of postpunk music, despite having a rather disdainful attitude toward music per se. TG's music, in a sense, was best understood as a delivery system for their ideas, a hangover from COUM's previous existence in the world of conceptual art. TG knew exactly what they were doing and told the listeners in meticulous, hyperarticulate detail. Indeed, if one took TG's stance literally—the music as a means to an end, a vehicle for the transmission of information—there was a sense in which one might as well skip the records and just read the eloquent interviews with the disarmingly pleasant P-Orridge.

BY THE TIME TG ANNOUNCED that “the mission is terminated,” P-Orridge had come to feel that industrial was turning into a distinctly unsavory scene. If that was true, though, it was largely TG’s fault for propagating the notion that the extremes of human existence are somehow more real or artistically valid than the middling areas. For P-Orridge, the most blatant example of a group who’d “misunderstood” TG was Whitehouse, an outfit he abhorred. The subtle distinction between the two groups was a thin line—between a neutral or ambivalent *presentation* of horror, atrocity, cruelty, and an unambiguous and blatant reveling in evil—easily crossed by many industrial fans and musicians.

In the liner notes to Whitehouse’s debut album, *Birthdeath Experience*, leader William Bennett promised that “this is the most brutal and extreme music of all time.” Whitehouse used a Wasp synth to generate noxious noise and recorded everything in the red zone for maximum distortion. They disregarded rhythm, melody, and structure, severing all ties to any previous musical genres and in the process spawning an “ears are wounds” microgenre of industrial later called “power electronics.” Bennett’s goal was to “cut to pure human states,” which in his mind meant violence and sexual violation, conveyed in tuneful ditties such as “I’m Coming Up Your Ass” and “Cock Dominant.” The name Whitehouse came from the porn mag *Whitehouse* (itself cheekily named after a famous matronly antiporn crusader), but Bennett’s group actually preferred ultra-hard-core “specialist” publications such as *Tit Pulp* and *Shitfun*, both of which inspired songs of the same name. Other favorite topics were fascism and serial killers.

When Bennett talked of his “vision of a bludgeoning, tyrannical sound,” the words caught the flavor of his entire worldview. An expert on the Marquis de Sade, he’d probably have concurred with the virulent antihumanism of Minister Saint-Fond from *Juliette*, who dreamed of establishing a neofeudal system that treated an entire class of people as animals. “I affirm that the fundamental, profoundest, and keenest penchant in man is incontestably to enchain his fellow creatures and to tyrannize them with all his might,” declared de Sade via Saint-Fond. “A bent for destruction, cruelty, and oppression is the first which Nature graves in our heart.” At their live “aktionen” (a nod to the Vienna Aktionists), Bennett would scream things such as “It’s your right to kill, it’s your fucking nature” and, after roughly fifteen minutes of skull-splitting noise, crowd ruckus, flying bottles, and bloodshed, the police would usually arrive and pull the plugs.

Playing with Whitehouse at some of their early Aktionen was a

character named Steve Stapleton, who was moonlighting from his own group, Nurse with Wound. The latter made a de Sade-inspired album in collaboration with Whitehouse called *The 150 Murderous Passions*. Most of the time, though, Nurse with Wound's music was more playful. Indeed, Stapleton rejects the term "industrial" altogether, claiming NWW only got pigeonholed as such because their first album's cover featured bondage-and-fetish imagery from the magazine *Latex and Leather Special*. But the group's postrock approach to abstract noise sculptures and found-sound collages does make their music fit loosely into the industrial category, even if the content does not.

If NWW had a spiritual avatar, it wasn't de Sade but another French writer, Lautréamont, author of the 1868 Gothic prose poem *Maldoror*. NWW's 1979 debut, *Chance Meeting on a Dissecting Table of a Sewing Machine and an Umbrella*, took its title from one of Lautréamont's deliberately absurd similes, whose dream-logic incongruity led to his being embraced by the surrealists as an illustrious precursor. *Chance Meeting* gleaned a five-question-mark rating in *Sounds* rather than the usual five stars, because reviewer John Gill wasn't totally sure whether its seemingly arbitrary concatenations of noise constituted pure genius or sheer nonsense.

Musically, Stapleton's prime crush was Krautrock. He actually lived in Germany for a while, working as a roadie for minor *kosmische* bands such as Kraan. A legendarily vast and esoteric list of experimental music, ranging from free improv through Europrog to *musique concrète*, was included on *Chance Meeting's* sleeve. If that album sounded a bit shapeless (it was recorded in six hours by a bunch of semimusicians who'd never played together previously), by 1982's *Homotopy to Marie* Stapleton had developed a genuinely idiosyncratic way of organizing noise, using the studio as an instrument to create darkly enchanting soundscapes as gorgeously grotesque as a Quay Brothers animation.

One thing most post-TG industrialists shared was a resolutely Nordic approach to rhythm. At best this meant metronomic pulse-grooves in the Moroder mold. At worst it meant clunky and portentous march beats. A few industrial bands embraced contemporary black dance music, though, and two of the best, Sheffield's Clock DVA and London's 23 Skidoo, were TG protégés. Clock DVA was Adi Newton's band after he got kicked out of the Future. After an initial phase of abstract sound experiments using tape loops and cut-ups, Clock DVA released *White Souls in Black Suits* through Industrial. Culled from fifteen hours of improvisation, the album was an attempt, says Newton, "to record that moment when intuitive magick occurs, what the surrealists describe as pure psychic

automatism.” The funk influence—James Brown, the Pop Group—kicked in with DVA’s second album, *Thirst*. “That’s what we’re after—more edgy, nervous energy sort of funk stuff, body music that flinches you and makes you move,” Newton told *Melody Maker*.

All scowling basslines and moody, sick-inside saxophone, *Thirst* was released in 1981 on Fetish, a label set up by Rod Pearce, a TG fan who put out Gristle’s final single. Fetish also released records by 23 Skidoo. Drawing on a handful of black precursors (the cocaine-spiked voodoo funk of Miles Davis’s *On the Corner*, the Last Poets’ fire-and-brimstone oratory, Fela Kuti’s hard-trance polyrhythms), Skidoo conceived of funk as a sinister energy, an active metaphor for Control, groove as trap and treadmill. Their 1981 mini-LP *Seven Songs* topped the indie charts and still sounds bloodcurdlingly intense. It opens with “Kundalini,” a malevolent tumble of hand percussion, guitar feedback, and guttural chants. On “Vegas El Bandito,” seething slap bass and brittle-nerved rhythm jostle with lost-in-endless-fog trumpet (an industrial motif invented by Cozey Fanni Tutti, who played cornet on several TG tracks). Best of all is “Porno Bass,” in which industrial finally makes a long overdue antifascist statement. Bass drones reverberate in cavernous murk, through which drifts the aristocratic voice of loathsome Hitler groupie Unity Mitford, taken from a radio interview. Dropped into the middle of an album that’s thrillingly steeped in trance rhythms and black funk, Mitford’s railing against pop music’s “senseless reiteration” as “the sign of a degenerating race” is implicitly exposed as Aryan paranoia.

23 Skidoo’s Alex Turnbull says that although they owed a lot to TG practically (P-Orridge let them rehearse at the Death Factory) and intellectually, they were more inspired musically by intensely rhythmic groups such as A Certain Ratio. Throbbing Gristle severed itself completely from the music of the African diaspora: jazz, R&B, funk, reggae. Skidoo allowed black America into industrial. They let the rest of the world in, too. Fans of Can’s “Ethnological Forgeries” series and Holger Czukay’s panglobal borrowings, Skidoo played the first WOMAD world music festival in July 1982, composing a special set that combined ethnic trance rhythms with a barrage of urban *musique concrète*. “Instead of using pleasant ‘world music’ sounds, we used city noises, gas canisters, explosions,” says Turnbull. “A third of the crowd fled immediately, but the ones that stayed were like, ‘Wow, that was absolutely unexpected!’”

Part of the WOMAD set made up side one of their next album, *The Culling Is Coming*. Side two’s chime-fest of tuned gongs indicated a drift eastward toward the music of Bali. After an expedition to Indonesia, 23 Skidoo recorded 1984’s *Urban Gamelan*. The vibe is a sort of humid disquiet—imagine *Apocalypse Now: The Day After*. By

this point, Skidoo were interested less in Gristle-style extreme noise terror and more in the idea of using repetition to gently induce “a kind of trance, that idea of reaching ecstasy through the music.” Coincidentally, around this time, a drug called Ecstasy was making its first appearances in the industrial scene.

23 Skidoo and Clock DVA were atypical TG offspring. The vast majority of second-wave industrialists favored either abstract noisescapes or metronomic Teutonica. Deeper into the eighties, Gristle’s spawn became ever more legion: Lustmord, Nocturnal Emissions, Death in June, In the Nursery, à;grumh..., Controlled Bleeding, Laibach, Skinny Puppy, Severed Heads, Front 242, Last Few Days,:zoviet*france:, Merzbow, and the list goes on. Most shared their progenitor’s antirock (even antimusic) bias and content-laden, concept-driven slant. Just like the Velvet Underground (one of the only groups TG acknowledged as an influence) it sometimes seems as though everybody who heard Throbbing Gristle started their own band.

CONTORT YOURSELF:

NO WAVE NEW YORK

AROUND THE SAME TIME Throbbing Gristle embarked upon their antimusic mission, a movement of bands similarly dedicated to razing rock history and starting from Year Zero was emerging in downtown New York. Dubbed No Wave, these groups—Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, Mars, DNA—wanted to create from a tabula rasa mind-set in which all the accepted notions and rules of musicality had been expunged.

As with Throbbing Gristle and the other U.K. industrialists, the primary spur for the No Wave groups was their contempt for punk rock's traditionalism. One of the first articles on the CBGB scene, represented by bands like the Ramones, Television, Patti Smith, Blondie, the Heartbreakers, et al., pinpointed the way punk couched itself as a *return* to something lost. Written in 1975 by James Wolcott and headlined A CONSERVATIVE IMPULSE IN THE NEW ROCK UNDERGROUND, the *Village Voice* feature celebrated the scene based around CBGB and Max's Kansas City for creating a feeling of local community in opposition to a mainstream rock culture that had now degenerated into just another branch of showbiz, with its own aristocracy of untouchably remote stars. But the musical translation of this egalitarian impulse involved ditching the entirety of the 1970s so far—not just the pomposity and pretension, but the ambition and experimentalism too—and *going back*. "Punk is just real good basic rock & roll...real basic fifties and early sixties rock," declared no less an authority than Nancy Spungen.

How different were the Ramones' leather jackets and cult of all things teenage from the fifties revivalism in America's pop mainstream, things like *Grease* and *Happy Days*? The Ramones' bracing blast of speed and minimalism served its purpose in showing up the flabby, flaccid indulgence of mid-1970s rock, but within two albums the band had exhausted their point. Elsewhere, the Heartbreakers' refried Chuck Berry was barely more advanced than British pub rock—Dr. Feelgood on an IV drip of smack rather than lager. Even the scene's most adventurous band, Television, drew heavily on late-sixties music, their quicksilver dual-guitar interplay steeped in the West Coast acid rock of the Byrds, Country Joe and the Fish, and the Grateful Dead.

The No Wave groups, in contrast, defined radicalism not as a return to roots but as *deracination*. They were united less by a common sound than by this shared determination to sever all connections with the past. Musically, they ranged from Teenage Jesus and the Jerks' stentorian dirges to Contortions' jazz-scarred thrash funk, from Mars'

guitar-flagellating cacophony to DNA's dislocated grooves. Scour the history of rock and you'll find only a handful of precedents for what the No Wavers did: Velvet Underground at their least songful and most punishingly abstract noise oriented; Lou Reed's *Metal Machine Music*; Yoko Ono's primal screech and John Lennon's guitar gougings for the Plastic Ono Band; the avant-blues convulsions of Captain Beefheart. But crucially, the No Wave groups *acted* as if they had no ancestors at all. In stark contrast to the U.K. industrial outfits, the No Wave bands staged their revolt against rock tradition using the standard rock instrumentation of guitar, bass, and drums. Occasionally they leavened this restricted arsenal with horns or keyboards, but they were always basic sixties-style organs, never synthesizers. Curiously, it was as though the No Wavers felt that the electronic route to making a postrock noise was *too easy*. It was more challenging, and perhaps more *threatening*, too, to use rock's own tools against itself. Which is why No Wave music irresistibly invites metaphors of dismemberment, desecration, and "defiling rock's corpse."

Ironically, a traditional blues and country technique, slide guitar, provided No Wave with some of its most disconcertingly novel noises. As used by three female guitarists—Connie Burg in Mars, Lydia Lunch in Teenage Jesus, and Pat Place in Contortions—slide offered musical novices the quickest way to generate startling sounds. It wasn't necessary to learn how to hold down chord shapes on the guitar strings. "Who wanted chords, all these progressions that had been used to death in rock?" jeers Teenage Jesus' front woman, Lydia Lunch, No Wave's raven-haired queen. "I'd use a knife, a beer bottle.... Glass gave the best sound. To this day I still don't know a single chord on the guitar."

As well as shunning electronics, the No Wave bands never really embraced the sound-warping possibilities of the recording studio. It was in small clubs at overwhelming volume that No Wave was most effective. The handful of studio recordings that survive the scene (most of them originally made by Charles Ball and released on his New York independent label Lust/Unlust) are like footnotes to the live experience. Along with the sheer sonic assault, No Wave shows often involved physical aggression as well. James Chance, bandleader and singer/saxophonist in Contortions, turned gigs into happenings by attacking the audience—jostling, slapping, legendarily grabbing a girl by the hair at one show and biting another woman "on the tit" (or so he claimed in an interview).

"James was like a Jackson Pollock painting, such an explosive personality," says Adele Bertei, Contortions' keyboard player. "And he had a strong masochistic streak. So he'd jump into the crowd and start kissing some girl. The boyfriend would push him off and a fistfight

would ensue. Our bassist George Scott and me would leap offstage and get into the melee. Then we'd all get back onto the stage with blood running down our faces—James being the worse for wear always because he'd get the brunt of it, plus he's so tiny." Partly sensationalist, calculated to procure the band notoriety and press attention, these tactics were also impelled by the perennial avant-garde urge to physically shatter the performer/audience barrier, to turn a spectacle into a *situation*. It worked. The shows started to sell out. "A big part of it was the art crowd," says Pat Place. "The violence plus the noise element made our shows something like performance art combined with music."

Pat Place was a typical No Waver, an artist who'd come to New York looking to have a career in the downtown art world only to be drawn toward the underground rock scene. Fresh out of art school in Chicago, where she'd studied painting and sculpture, she arrived in New York hoping to become some kind of conceptual artist. "Performance art was the hot thing at that point," she recalls. It was also a breeding ground for No Wavers. DNA's Arto Lindsay and Robin Crutchfield, and Mark Cunningham of Mars, all came from experimental theater or performance art backgrounds. Along with several other future No Wave luminaries, Cunningham and Lindsay attended Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida. "Like other small progressive colleges of the early 70s, it was putting into practice recent ideas from the 1960s like free-form studies, so it was perfect for self-expression and a magnet for freaks and misfits from around the country," recalls Cunningham. "I met Arto the first day I was there and we ditched our assigned roommates and moved in together."

New York beckoned as the home of all things conceptual and multimedia, the world capital of aesthetic border crossing and "total art." All the avant-garde ideas of the sixties, from Fluxus to the Vienna Aktionists, says Lindsay, "had filtered down to us kids in the early seventies. There was a youthful thing of seeing how far you could push anything." Lindsay's hero was the poet turned performance artist Vito Acconci. "Especially his piece *Seed Bed*, where he built a false floor under a gallery. He lay under that floor for a few hours every day and there was a sign on the wall saying, 'The artist is under the floor listening to you, fantasizing and masturbating while you're in the gallery!'" Lindsay also admired extremists such as Chris Burden and Hermann Nitsch, who staged ritualistic, blood-soaked feats of endurance and abjection.

Artists gravitated to New York's underground rock scene partly because there seemed to be more possibilities for making something happen there in the art world, where the market was depressed and the gallery circuit tough for young painters to break into. But even

successful artists such as Robert Longo played in bands. Punk had restored rock's status as the heat-generating power spot of modern culture. It made the downtown milieu of SoHo's art spaces, home to multimedia installations, performance art, and concerts by minimalist composers, seem pallid and genteel. Although some "real" musicians participated in No Wave (Chance, for example, was conservatory educated), most had no previous involvement in rock beyond listening. Typically their primary vocation was film or poetry or the visual arts. Coming to music from other areas, they had a slightly distanced approach, which enabled them to grapple with their instruments (often chosen arbitrarily) as foreign objects, tools to be misused or reinvented.

Although they predated both No Wave and punk by several years, Suicide was in many ways the archetype of New York's collision of art and rock. Singer Alan Vega was a sculptor who used electric lights and ready-mades (Catholic kitsch trinkets, plastic toys, porno cards, celebrity photos) to create trash-culture shrines from some postcataclysmic America of the near future. In the late sixties, he joined the Art Workers Coalition, a militant socialist group that once barricaded the Museum of Modern Art. He then became a linchpin of the Project of Living Artists, an anarchic workshop/performance space in SoHo. Vega worked at the Project by day and lived there illegally by night. It was there that he met free-jazz musician Martin Rev and formed Suicide.

The band emerged out of endless free-form jamming. "Suicide was like the big bang of the universe," Vega says. "Chaos, then after a while the gases began to form little balls that became the galaxies. Same with us, except the gases began to form little songs, first 'Cheree,' then 'Ghost Rider.'" A unique sound developed. Vega's half-spoken, half-sung incantations resembled a cross between rockabilly and method acting; Rev generated pittering pulses from a beat-up electronic keyboard and crude but hypnotic beats using a cruddy drum machine originally designed for weddings and bar mitzvahs.

Vega's lyrics reveal a Warhol/Lichtenstein-like attraction to the two-dimensional pulp fictions and larger-than-real-life icons of American mass culture. Suicide's name itself came from "Satan Suicide," an issue of Vega's favorite comic book, *Ghost Rider*. Like a sci-fi Elvis, Vega's voice was swathed in eerie reverb and delay effects that harked back to the echo on Presley's voice circa *The Sun Sessions* while simultaneously evoking the vapor trails of a rocket ship. Deliberately simple, his lyrics risked corn and trusted in the timeless power of cliché.

As infamous as they were infrequent, Suicide's shows worked as supercolliders in which ideas from minimalism, auto-destructive art,

living theater, and pop art clashed. You could see Suicide's confrontational shows and physical altercations with the audience (who sometimes responded in kind—"Knives, axes, I got hit one time in the eye with a wrench!" says Vega) as performance art, but Vega actually got the idea from Iggy Pop. In 1970, he went to see the Stooges, supporting MC5, at the New York State Pavilion. "Iggy's flying into the audience, then he's back onstage, cutting himself up with drumsticks, bleeding. The whole set lasted, like, twenty minutes. And whoever was in the sound booth put on one of Bach's Brandenburg Concertos immediately afterward, instead of the usual rock 'n' roll, and that was perfect, because what we had just seen was great art. For the first time in my life the audience and the stage merged into one. It became this environmental thing. And that showed me you didn't have to do static artworks, you could create situations."

Suicide were the godfathers of No Wave, almost literally. Lydia Lunch, arriving in Manhattan as a sixteen-year-old runaway from upstate New York, was "kind of adopted by Martin Rev, who had a son who was older than me. Marty looked after me, gave me vitamins. What better parents could you have than Suicide? They were my first friends in New York." James Chance likewise felt filial toward Suicide. "First day in New York, straight outta Milwaukee, James approached us," says Vega. Chance recognized a kinship in Suicide's audience-assaulting urge to smash the fourth wall, while Vega dug Chance's Sinatresque cool onstage and thought Chance "was going to be a superstar."

By the time the No Wavers started arriving in New York, the heartland of bohemia had shifted from SoHo (the area of western downtown Manhattan that's immediately below Houston Street) to the even cheaper Lower East Side (in those days, a much larger area of eastern downtown than it is today, running from Fourteenth Street down past Houston Street to the edge of Chinatown). Today, traces of the Lower East Side's former scuzz peek out here and there amidst the gentrification that resulted in part of the area being renamed the East Village. But in the midseventies, there was not a boutique or trendy restaurant in sight. A patchwork of burned-out buildings and vacant, garbage-strewn lots, the neighborhood looked like a war zone. Most "regular" folk had fled to the suburbs, leaving the area to bums, bohos, junkies, and the ethnic poor. Unable to rent out all their rooms and unwilling to sell because property values had plummeted, landlords increasingly resorted to insurance scams. They'd set fire to their buildings, or let services deteriorate to the point where the tenants burned down their own tenements in order to get rehoused by the city. In 1978 alone there were 354 suspicious fires in the Lower

East Side.

For those prepared to live somewhere that looked almost as bombed-out as Beirut, and where heroin was easier to buy than groceries, the Lower East Side was paradise. "I had a place on Second Street between Avenues A and B that cost about a hundred ten dollars a month," says James Chance. A homeless Lydia Lunch came by one night and ended up staying at the fifth-floor walk-up apartment for almost a year. Connie Burg, Mark Cunningham, and Arto Lindsay all lived on Tenth Street and Avenue B, across from the only substantial patch of greenery in the whole Lower East Side, Tompkins Square Park. "It was really dangerous," recalls Burg. "I saw someone shot almost every day, dead bodies just left in the park." Downtown was almost unpoliced: The city let the neighborhood fester.

The cheap rents allowed the No Wavers to work sporadically, if at all, dedicating themselves to their art. And to hedonism. "After-hours clubs were everywhere," says Pat Place. Along with the clubs, the No Wavers frequented artist's bars like Barnabus Rex and the Ocean Club where the drinks were very cheap. "I think there was one winter where I didn't see daylight!" laughs Place. "You'd see the sunrise as you were going home and you'd go to sleep, then get up about four in the afternoon and start all over again." Fueling this freak scene of night creatures were all kinds of drugs, from speed and pot to the downer Quaalude. "But heroin was the most appealing," says Place, "and the most deadly." Third Street between Avenues A and B was home to artists, No Wave musicians, and a notorious drug den known as the Toilet. As with other local cop spots, lines of customers waiting to score stretched down the sidewalk. "I almost feel like drugs were pushed down here to anesthetize us, and we all succumbed," says Adele Bertei. "I remember a time when almost every woman I knew had a copy of William Burroughs's *Junky* next to her bed and was shooting up." The flood of pure Iranian heroin into the market claimed many lives, including Contortions bassist George Scott III.

Pre-AIDS and pre-Reaganism, downtown New York existed in a peculiar bubble of Weimar-like decadence, characterized by drugs, drink, and polymorphous perverse sex. The city as a whole might have been teetering on the edge of bankruptcy, but the artists of the Lower East Side found ways to have a real cool time in the midst of collapse. Although they shared the apocalyptic cold war mind-set of the late seventies, the No Wavers were weirdly insulated from the political urgencies of the time. "It was much more about personal insanity than political insanity," says Lydia Lunch. "We didn't have someone like Mayor Giuliani breathing down our necks. It was a very loose time. There wasn't much to fight against, except tradition, where you came from, what your parents were. It was like you'd been thrown into this

adolescent adult fun fair and left to figure it out.”

In classic bohemian fashion, art replaced politics as the way to change reality. Living a nonconformist lifestyle was in itself an art. Says Bertei, “We all lived by walking into art openings, stealing all the food. Everyone gawked at us because we were almost like an exhibition of our own. My head was shorn down to about an inch, my eyebrows were shaved, I used to wear these flea-bitten Buster Keaton suits. The art scene was very conservative, in the galleries everyone would be wearing suits. In a way we were more exciting than the art that was on the walls.”

No Wave existed on the slippery cusp between art and anti-art. Lydia Lunch scorned the A-word, preferring to see herself as a journalist, writer, even conceptualist. “Music was just a particular tool to get across the emotional impact. If spoken word had been more readily available in the late seventies, I’d have done that.” In the cultural geography of downtown New York, No Wave’s mixed feelings about art translated into a hostile, jostling rivalry between the Lower East Side and SoHo, which only a few years earlier had been *the* area for artists to live and work, but was now becoming gentrified and speckled with galleries. “I hate Art. It makes me sick,” James Chance spat. “SoHo should be blown off the fucking map, along with all its artsy assholes.”

The two worlds collided at Artists Space, a nonprofit gallery/performance space located in the area just south of SoHo known as Tribeca. Artists Space hosted a five-day festival of New York underground rock in May 1978. The first three nights featured long-forgotten No Wave fellow-traveler groups (“They were failed painters, now they’re failed musicians,” someone in the audience quipped) but the festival climaxed over the weekend with two double bills: DNA and Contortions on Friday, and Mars and Teenage Jesus and the Jerks on Saturday. The set by Contortions was interrupted by a fight between Chance and the *Village Voice*’s chief rock critic Robert Christgau. Chance had left the stage and began to “playfully or pseudoplayfully” hit a female friend of the critic’s. Legend has it the critic beat the singer to a pulp, but Christgau downplays the incident, claiming he intervened by “basically sitting on Chance. And maybe I held him down, too. He’s a little guy!”

In the audience stood a fascinated Brian Eno. He’d arrived in New York on April 23, planning to stay for only three weeks while he worked on various projects, including the mastering of Talking Heads’ second album, which he’d produced. But, Eno told *Melody Maker* in 1980, “It turned out that I happened to be in New York during one of the most exciting months of the decade, I should think, in terms of music. It seemed like there were 500 new bands who all started that

[May].” He ended up staying for another seven months, totally absorbed in the crosstown traffic between music and art.

Outwardly, Eno had little in common with No Wave’s fanatical extremists. A dilettante sensualist, English to the core, Eno pursued a much gentler form of decadence. According to Bertei, who briefly worked as his personal assistant in New York, “He’d send me out on these insane errands, give me an envelope of hundred-dollar bills and a list of what he needed that day: an Olivetti typewriter, French voile socks, magazines of bald-headed black women with huge tits.”

In another sense, No Wave could hardly have been more in tune with Eno, an art school grad who came to music with a weird mixture of technical naïveté and conceptual sophistication. This combination enabled him to approach rock from an oblique angle, reinventing instruments and dismantling structures. The No Wave scene was chock-full of mini-Enos. Talking to *Creem* in late 1978, Eno celebrated No Wave in terms that could equally be applied to applaud his own role as pop vanguardist. The city was full of “research bands,” he said, who took “deliberately extreme stances that are very interesting because they define the edges of a piece of territory.” Other bands might not choose to go that far, but “having that territory staked out is very important. It makes things easier for everyone else.”

Convinced that this experimental but ephemeral scene urgently required documentation before the moment passed, Eno proposed the idea of a No Wave compilation with himself as producer. The sessions for *No New York* bore barely a trace of the studio treatments and textural colorations for which Eno was famous. James Chance recalls the Contortions’ tracks being “done totally live in the studio, no separation between the instruments, no overdubs, just like a document.” Only Mars saw any of Eno’s legendary studio wizardry. “He was totally hands-on, using the board as an instrument,” says Mark Cunningham. “We were actually more conservative than Eno, feeling that the music’s radicalism didn’t need to be saturated in special effects.” Some of the bands voiced unhappiness with the results. But the most controversial aspect of *No New York* was the decision to limit the lineup to the four major No Wave bands—Contortions, Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, DNA, and Mars, each of whom contributed four tracks—rather than reflect the full scope of the scene.

Theoretical Girls and the Gynecologists, two highly regarded bands who’d shared the Wednesday-night bill of the Artists Space festival, had been pointedly excluded because of their associations with the SoHo art scene. The Gynecologists included Rhys Chatham, an avant-classical composer and music director of the Kitchen, one of SoHo’s most important performance spaces. Theoretical Girls, meanwhile,

boasted no less than two composers in its lineup, Glenn Branca and Jeffrey Lohn. After *Theoretical Girls* disintegrated, Branca started composing symphonies for electric guitar, to be performed by large ensembles of players at massive volume so that they stunned the audience into rapt submission. In doing so he took several leaves out of Rhys Chatham's book (there's some dispute over who actually invented the "guitar army" idea), but Branca also drew some inspiration from Mars, who generated a barrage of metallic cacophony by percussively pounding their guitars.

The first of the *No New York* bands to form, Mars started as "a quirky rock group," says Connie Burg, then systematically shed "all the conventions of rock 'n' roll music." Unified tempo was first to go, followed swiftly by tonality. Mars explored detuning the guitar, retuning within songs, having the tuning be mobile. "Insects in upstate New York" inspired the chittering soundswarm of "Helen Forsdale," says Burg. "We were trying to get the guitars to buzz." Toward the end of Mars' brief life span, second guitarist Sumner Crane—actually a skilled blues player—generated noise by manipulating the guitar jack.

Despite the post-Velvets whiteness of Mars' torrential noise and the total absence of groove or funk, there were subliminal "African elements," according to Mark Cunningham. "When I started detuning my bass it became very primitive and percussive." On arriving in New York, he and roommate Arto Lindsay had ransacked the city's record stores for ethnomusicological albums. From the 1950s onward there had been "a great boom of field recordings of native music. All kinds of African stuff and trance music were easy to find and very inspiring." "Ecstatic trance music," Cunningham's term for some of this ethnological exotica, would actually be a good tag for Mars, too, although the overall emotional vibe of their music was less mystic rapture and more "the agony is the ecstasy." Connie Burg's and Sumner Crane's torture-victim vocals sound deeply disturbed and genuinely perturbing. At the extreme, pieces such as "Hairwaves" resemble the debris of a shattered psyche. "Most of the falsetto is Sumner, and most of the low singing is me," says Burg. "That juxtaposition, that gender switch, was interesting to us." It dovetailed with one of the most striking (for 1978) aspects of Mars, its two-woman, two-man lineup, with Nancy Arlen taking on the traditionally masculine job of drumming.

Mars polarized audiences. "We had our fans and we definitely had our detractors," laughs Burg. "The girlfriend of Stiv Bators from the Dead Boys threw a chair at me at one show. We were always accused of being 'arty and empty.' A critic wrote that about us, which we turned into the song 'RTMT.'" Mars were the No Waver's No Wave band. "I saw Mars before Teenage Jesus existed," Lydia Lunch

recalled. "I was very encouraged. They were so dissonant, so obviously insane. There were no compromises or concessions to anything that had existed previously. They were truly creating from their own torture."

A poet who turned to music as the most readily available means of expression, Lydia Lunch was a bit like the anti-Patti Smith. Where the Rimbaud-and Dylan-worshipping Smith exalted oceanic feelings, Lunch detested music that "flows and weaves," declaring, "it's like drinking a glass of water.... I'd rather drink razor blades." Lunch conceived Teenage Jesus and the Jerks as an act of cultural patricide (or matricide, in Patti's case). "The whole goal was to kill your idols, as Sonic Youth later put it. Everything that had influenced me up to that point I found too traditional—whether it was Patti Smith, the Stooges, Lou Reed's *Berlin*. It was fine and good for its moment, but I felt there had to be something more radical. It's got to be *disemboweled*."

Teenage Jesus' music matched Lunch's personality, by her own description "coarse, harsh, bitter...I was such a frightening person!" Drummer Bradley Field couldn't play drums and didn't even have a proper kit, just a single cymbal and a dysfunctional snare. "I couldn't play guitar, but that wasn't the point," says Lunch. "I developed my own style, which suited the primal urgency I needed to evacuate from my system before I exploded like a miniature nuclear power plant." Lunch's singing was equally minimal, a piercing and piteous one-note wail. "I like my own note," she once quipped. "What's wrong with the note I have?" With some songs as brief as forty-one seconds, a typical Teenage Jesus performance lasted about ten minutes.

"Orphans" is probably the trio's most well known song (largely for its couplet "No more ankles and no more toes/Little orphans running through the bloody snow"), but Teenage Jesus' archetypal "short, fast sound stab" is "The Closet." Field's hammer-blow snare and Lunch's harrowed shriek merge into a tolling death knell rhythm midway between spasm and dirge. The whole vibe runs the gamut of vaguely Teutonic S-words: stark, severe, strict. Lunch was a disciplinarian. She recalls "literally beating" Field and bassist Gordon Stevenson at rehearsals "with coat hangers if they'd made any mistakes at a gig. We rehearsed ad nauseam and were pretty fucking tight. It's pretty fascist sounding, and I was the fucking dictator." Onstage, Lunch remained rigid, disdaining to engage the audience with eye contact or banter, maintaining an unbridgeable moat of alienation between performer and spectators. James Chance was an early member of Teenage Jesus, but Lunch kicked him out for having too much contact with the audience. "I didn't think Teenage Jesus should mingle with the audience, even if to attack them. Don't touch those bastards, let 'em

just sit there in horror!”

At the same time as she was leading Teenage Jesus, Lunch also played in Beirut Slump, a more atmospheric outfit whose reeling malaise of noise she compared to the Blob. “It oozes under doors and people either run away fast to avoid it or they like to let this gooey junk surround them.” Like Teenage Jesus, Beirut Slump was composed largely of people who’d never played music before. Filmmaker Vivienne Dick, for instance, contributed keyboards. Dick was a prime mover in the No Wave-affiliated “New Cinema” scene. Cofounded by onetime Contortions guitarist James Nares and fellow filmmakers Becky Johnston and Eric Mitchell, the New Cinema was a movie theater as well as a movement. A fifty-seat space on St. Mark’s Place with a video screen, it showed Super 8 movies that had been transferred to video, works like Nares’s *Rome ’78*, Scott and Beth B.’s *Black Box*, and Mitchell’s *Red Italy*. The New Cinema directors drew on a pool of actors that included downtown scenesters such as Patti Astor, along with just about every No Wave musician. Lunch, for instance, costarred with Pat Place in Dick’s *She Had Her Gun All Ready*. “Vivienne’s films were very primitive and psychological,” says Place. “We made this trip out to Coney Island, where I ended up murdering Lydia’s character on the Cyclone after a long series of these weird vague psychotic interactions!”

Lo-fi and low budget, New Cinema flicks got made with astonishing speed. In some cases, they were scripted, filmed, and premiered within a week. Breaking with the ruling avant-garde cinema aesthetic of Stan Brakhage-style abstraction, the New Cinema directors preferred narrative film, harking back to the earlier sixties underground of Warhol and Jack Smith along with B-movie genre films from the 1950s, all pulp plots and ultraviolent thrills. Those involved in No Wave and New Cinema alike felt a mixture of appalled fascination and envious admiration toward all exponents of antisocial or pathological behavior. Murderers, terrorists, and cult leaders such as Jim Jones all possessed a ruthless will to power and an unflinching capacity to translate thought into deed. James Chance crystallized the attitude when he declared: “I can’t stand liberals. They’re so stupid and wishy-washy and their whole philosophy is so half-assed. They’re not extreme and I only like people who are extreme.”

Chance himself fused three great American musical extremists—Iggy Pop, James Brown, and Albert Ayler—into his tiny, scrawny frame. Before coming to New York, he’d done a three-year stint at the Wisconsin Conservatory of Music and played in a Stooges-influenced rock band called Death. Arriving in Manhattan, he’d tried to make a name for himself in the loft jazz scene, but wasn’t exactly warmly embraced. His punk attitude chafed against the late-sixties mind-set of

the predominantly black jazz milieu. One ensemble he played in, called Flaming Youth, had a gig at Environ, a space that was a dance studio by day. When it was Chance's turn to solo, he leaped in midair, skidded across the polished wood floor, and blasted his alto sax in a girl's face. "I totally freaked out the audience," he recalls. The critic Robert Palmer wrote a scathing review of the band, mentioning a certain saxophonist who was closer to a "contortionist act" than a musician. Unwittingly, Palmer had christened Chance's next project.

As for the James Brown influence, Chance pinpoints a single track as the founding musical text for Contortions, 1970's "Super Bad, Parts 1 and 2." "What really got me into JB was the sax solos on that single—real out-there playing like you'd get on an Ayler or Sun Ra record." Combining Brown's regal showmanship with Iggy's kamikaze theatrics, Chance invented punk funk. Hopped up on death drive and artificial energy, Contortions' music was riddled with tics and jerks, a prickly, irritable sound, like a speed freak scratching at hallucinatory bugs under the skin. Imagine funk's low-down, life-affirming energy trapped and turned against itself. Soul, denied an outlet, becomes cystlike. Rhythmically and lyrically, James Brown songs like "Sex Machine" and "I Got Ants in My Pants" pointed toward a racked ecstasy of painful pleasure that was almost dehumanizing. Picking up on these hints, Chance imagined funk as voodoo possession and cold-fever delirium, the perfect vehicle for exploring themes of addiction, sexual bondage, and morbid obsession.

As a James Brown-style bandleader, Chance exerted total control over Contortions. "When it first started, no one else had ever played their instruments before," he recalled. "People who can't play have more fresh ideas. I looked for people I could teach to play." The two women were recruited simply because they looked cool. Place was tall and androgynous with cropped blond hair. Chance describes Bertei as "this pint-size girl who came on like some kind of lesbian pimp." A Clevelander who'd lived in a reformatory for troubled teenage girls, Bertei "approached the keyboards like I play a conga drum," she told the *East Village Eye*. "Which was real percussive, slapping the keys in clusters. Sometimes I'd beat them with my fists or elbows. Once I jumped up on the keyboards at a particularly frenzied gig and I kinda danced on them, which fucked the keyboard up." Place remembers the "complete cacophony" of Contortions' first gig: "At the end I had two strings left on my guitar and it was completely blood splattered. I didn't know how to strum the guitar and it just ripped the skin right off my fingers."

Early on, Contortions played *fast*, such that their funk could pass for punk. Ultimately, this would be one reason for the band's combusting. "Live, James would insist on counting everything, and

he'd always double the time," drummer Don Christensen told *Melody Maker*. "One time he counted it out so fast we couldn't play it," added second guitarist Jody Harris. "He couldn't just relax and let the music get into any kind of groove. He had to have absolute control over the sound." But this paroxysmic intensity went down well with the CBGB and Max's Kansas City audience. Musically, Contortions were more accessible than the other No Wave bands. "My songs were always in a key, they had some kind of tonal center," says Chance. "But I didn't have chord structures. I constructed the songs out of interlocking parts played by each instrument, an idea I more or less got from James Brown." Chance's ulcerous alto sax, meanwhile, could be heard "levitating above the fray" of tightly meshed rhythmic cogs "like snake charming gone terribly wrong," as Glenn O'Brien, one of No Wave's journalistic supporters, put it.

DNA had a similar approach, except their parts slotted together like the pieces of some faultily designed three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle. "Skeletal, stop-start, lots of silences," as Arto Lindsay put it, the songs often seemed to disassemble themselves in front of your ears. Lindsay had a twelve-string Danelectro guitar but instead of using it in the obvious way—for melodic, folky arpeggios and fingerpicking—he played it as a rhythm instrument, chipping out a scrabble of texture shards, like scrambled Chic. "It was sculptural as opposed to painterly, shapes that poked out at you, rather than a surface." DNA were a trio of rootless cosmopolitans. Lindsay grew up in Brazil with his missionary parents. Keyboard player Robin Crutchfield was a gay misfit who performed surreal street theater pieces. Drummer Ikue Mori was Japanese, and as complete a novice at her instrument as she was with the English language. "Communicating with Ikue, a lot of it was diagram and gesture," says Crutchfield. "Arto might have to act out in charade what he wanted to do, shuffling and shaking his arms to a certain beat or gesturing for a pause or tempo change." Lindsay gave Mori a record of Brazilian drumbeats, which she tried to imitate while bringing in elements of Japanese court music, "the kind of thing that has real rhythmic authority," he says, "but you can't exactly work out what the rhythm is." As a result, Mori developed a totally idiosyncratic approach to drumming. No less disorienting, Lindsay's "singing" consisted of animalistic barks and growls, flubbed vocal smears and shamanic grunts. "Sometimes it was an extension of the sheer feeling aspect of the blues," he says. "Or like singing in languages you don't understand, like Indian. In Florida, I'd been in this student-directed theater group, and we'd done exercises in using the voice in nine different ways, like, 'Okay let's improvise for half an hour, don't make it human but don't make it mechanical either.'"

Early DNA is incredibly abstruse, but when Crutchfield (who'd been playing keyboards sculpturally, according to visual patterns of clustered keys) quit in 1978, DNA acquired more of a groove with the arrival of bassist Tim Wright, formerly of Pere Ubu. "DNA doesn't get much credit for this, but we were very funky," says Lindsay. In some ways the group's closest kin weren't the other No Wavers but black New York musicians like Prime Time (Ornette Coleman's band) and James "Blood" Ulmer, who translated Coleman's theories into scorching, tempestuous punk funk that wowed the mostly white audiences at New Wave discos like Hurrah's. At the same time, there was nothing really jazzy about DNA. Because it came across so abstract and self-deconstructing, people assumed their music was totally improvised, but DNA actually rehearsed everything down to the smallest gear shift. Everything was intensely premeditated and discussed, from the overall band's style (early on they theorized about DNA sounding like "one giant instrument" or "if a rat got loose inside a computer") to the internal mechanisms of a specific piece to the song lyrics. Lindsay approached the words as language exercises rather than stories or emotional expression. He'd set himself the task, say, of depicting "a sex act observed from the bridge of a nose."

Overlapping with DNA, Lindsay played in the Lounge Lizards, an ensemble explicitly based around the idea of punk jazz. Formed by his friend John Lurie, a New Cinema filmmaker and an actor in performance pieces at the Squat Theatre, the Lounge Lizards' retro panache of sharp suits and pompadour coifs owed a lot to James Chance's image. "Lurie used to more or less follow me around in the street," sniggers Chance. "When I first met him he didn't look so dapper at all." Originally called the Power Tools, Lurie's group played its first gig dressed in suits. "The girls went nuts for it," says Lindsay. "We were instant sex symbols." Not bad going for Arto, considering that his normal apparel, "lived-in pants and secondhand-looking sweaters, simple button-down shirts and horn-rimmed glasses, made the guys from Devo look stylin'," according to Crutchfield. After changing their name to the Lounge Lizards, the group developed a sound and shtick that Lurie flippantly described as "fake jazz" in an early interview. The quip stuck and became a millstone, infuriating the earnest custodians of the loft jazz scene and making the Lizards seem like mere trivial pastiche. "John spent many years trying to overcome that term, but it was actually appropriate," says Lindsay. "We were playing jazzlike rhythms and melody lines, but none of the musicians were then capable of soloing over the changes, which is the essence of real jazz." The Lounge Lizards did get to make their debut album with Miles Davis's producer Teo Macero at Black Rock, a CBS studio on Fifty-seventh Street where many jazz greats had recorded.

Still, most jazz aficionados continued to believe “they were punks taking the piss out of jazz,” says Glenn O’Brien. “Which wasn’t true.”

In “The White Noise Supremacists,” a controversial *Village Voice* essay published in April 1979, Lester Bangs pointed out the uncomfortable connections between the near total absence of black musicians on the CBGB scene, punk’s penchant for using racist language (all part of its antiliberal, we-hate-everybody-equally attitude), and the perilous ambiguity of punk’s flirtations with Nazi imagery. Factor in the sheer unswinging whiteness of punk rock and most New Wave music, and you had a situation where, for the first time since before the 1920s hot-jazz era, white bohemians were disengaged from black culture. Not only that, but some of them were *proud* of this disengagement. Just a week before the Bangs essay, the *Village Voice* profiled Legs McNeil of *Punk* magazine. Writer Marc Jacobson discussed how McNeil and his cohorts consciously rejected the whole notion of the hipster as “white negro” and dedicated themselves to celebrating all things teenage, suburban, and Caucasian. Years later, McNeil candidly discussed this segregationist aspect of punk in an interview with Jon Savage: “We were all white: there were no black people involved with this. In the sixties hippies always wanted to be black. We were going, ‘fuck the Blues, fuck the black experience.’” McNeil believed that disco was the putrid sonic progeny of an unholy union of blacks and gays. *Punk*’s debut issue, in January 1976, began with a rabid mission statement: “Death to Disco Shit. Long live the Rock! I’ve seen the canned crap take real live people and turn them into dogs! The epitome of all that’s wrong with Western civilization is disco.”

Unaware of its gay underground origins, most punks saw disco as the mass-produced, mechanistic sound of escapism and complacency, uptown Muzak with a beat for the moneyed and glamour struck. “There was the disco culture up at Studio 54 and then there was us,” says Adele Bertei. “When it came to disco, we were like these vicious little misanthropes with Tourette’s syndrome. You’d get a torrent of expletives.” In the context of 1978, with CBGB types treating disco as both pariah and tyrant (it dominated the radio, ultimately taking over the only station in the city that played New Wave), just about the vilest act of cultural treason imaginable was a punk band going disco. Which is precisely what James Chance did.

The idea originated with Michael Zilkha, a young entrepreneur who cofounded the New York record label ZE. Zilkha came from an extremely genteel background (his family was incredibly wealthy, he’d grown up in England where he attended top private schools), but he was totally infatuated with No Wave’s extremism. Seeing real star potential in James Chance and Lydia Lunch, he approached the

Contortions' singer with a proposition: ZE would release a "proper" Contortions album simultaneously with a disco version of the James Chance experience. "Michael said, 'It doesn't have to be a *commercial* disco record, just do whatever *your* idea of disco is. Here's ten thousand dollars,'" recalls Chance.

The sheer conceptual shock value of becoming a disco turncoat and fucking with everybody's heads grabbed Chance's imagination. By January 1979 he was telling *SoHo Weekly News*, "I've always been interested in disco. I mean, disco is *disgusting*, but there's something in it that's always interested me—*monotony*. It's sort of jungle music, but whitened and perverted. On this album I'm trying to restore it to what it *could* be. Really primitive." Suddenly the idea of going commercial and sounding "slick" appealed to him. "I'm not interested in being a starving artist," Chance declared. Fuck art, he was first and foremost "a businessman." For an infamous feature published in the *East Village Eye*, Chance and lover/manager Anya Phillips each penned a short but fulsome celebration of selling out. "Anyone with any semblance of a brain should know by now that it's time to forget about all this outdated, cornball 'new/no wave' drivel," sneered Chance. "Anyone who stays on the Lower East Side will become the inevitable victim of provincial mind rot.... So dislocate yourself. Get slick, move uptown and get trancin' with some superradioactive disco voodoo funk." Phillips boasted about how she'd groomed and styled Chance and set him on the road to fame and fortune. "Money bought us a first class ticket out of the Lower East Side pisshole. It's not my problem you're all waiting to leave on standby."

A major downtown scenester/catalyst until she was diagnosed with cancer in 1979, Anya Philips was a formidable character. "Anya was the one who more or less put my whole image together," says Chance. "She made clothes, but most of the stuff we found in thrift stores—tuxedos, white dinner jackets, sharkskin jackets like sixties soul singers wore." The look reinforced No Wave's break with punk's rock 'n' rollness, resurrecting the elegance and razzle of prerock showbiz.

To the other Contortions, though, this manipulative Chinese American beauty was a Yoko Ono-like figure. "She began to cause a rift between James and the band, make him the star," says Bertei. "Not that he wasn't already the leader, but it became the James Chance Show after she became manager." For Chance's disco album *Off White*, the other Contortions were hired as session musicians and the project was credited to James White and the Blacks (Phillips had wanted "and His Blacks" but Zilkha balked at that). Live, they added a horn section and two teenage dancing girls called the Disco Lolitas, making the experience more like a traditional soul revue. For *Off*

White's launch party, ZE rented Irving Plaza and the group made a disco-style appearance, lip-synching to the songs with no live instruments. They staged a boudoir scene for "Stained Sheets," the voluptuous Lydia Lunch pantomiming her cameo vocals reclined on a couch. The song resembles a sordid S&M twist on Donna Summer's "Love to Love You Baby." It's a phone sex duet between Chance and Lunch, juxtaposing his blasé contempt with her orgasmic whimpers and nonverbal moans of desperation.

Off White and its sister album, *Buy*, probed the darker corners of sexuality. *Buy*'s cover featured Terry Sellers, author of *The Correct Sadist*, scantily clad in panties and a strange deconstructed bra of Philip's own design. Inside, "I Don't Want to Be Happy" confessed that Chance's "idea of fun" was "being whipped on the back of the thighs," while in "Bedroom Athlete" he yelps, "I won't be your slave unless you will be *mine*." *Off White*, meanwhile, verged on a musical essay about racial tourism, with the track "Almost Black" representing the most dubious homage to blackness as sexy sociopathology and virile primitivism since Norman Mailer's 1957 essay "The White Negro." The track features a white girl and a black girl bitterly disputing the attributes and defects of "James White": "Well, he's *almost black*"/"That nigger's *white*"/"Well, he's got some *moves*"/"But they *ain't right*."

Inverting James Brown's pride and dignity to white bohemian self-abasement and cynicism, the Chance worldview stripped life of sentimentality, tenderness, and all values. In a nutshell, life's cheap, love's a lie, narcotics numb the pain. The lyrics hammered the same idea over and over: "I only live on the surface/I don't think people are very pretty inside"; "Reduce yourself to a zero." Appearing on both *Buy* and *Off White* in different versions, the anthem "Contort Yourself" evoked a jaded Dionysian frenzy, the joyless flailing of empty souls trying to evacuate even more of their consciousness. "Take out all the garbage that's in your brain/Why don't you try being stupid instead of smart?"

In interviews, Chance maintained an impregnable facade of nihilism. "It's ridiculous to believe in things," he told one interviewer, "it's the height of absurdity." This shtick—Chance as voidoid—often became comically overstated. "I *do not* relate to people!" he insisted to *New York Rocker*'s Roy Trakin. "I have no respect for a fan. A fan is the lowest creature on earth." Today Trakin recalls that "James Chance and Lydia Lunch, they both kept up a front. I found them kind of sweet in a way. There was pain underneath, too. They were calling out. What was interesting was that they needed you to be the part of the equation. It's a classic syndrome: You need an audience and you can't stand your audience."

Taken together, Chance's double debut represented No Wave's strongest and most enduring recorded statement: *Buy* captured the unsustainable intensity of the early scene, and the chic, sleek *Off White* pointed ahead toward "mutant disco," the next phase of New York postpunk. But Zilkha's attempt to make Chance into a star failed. He didn't do much better with Lydia Lunch's solo debut, *Queen of Siam*. "The idea was to take these characters and make them attractive," Zilkha says now, wistfully. "Treat them like they were normal entertainers. For instance, I thought Lydia was a very attractive personality, but Teenage Jesus was a very tough listen. I thought she should be sex kittenish." For *Queen of Siam*, Lunch temporarily dropped her banshee howl for a baby-doll voice, innocent yet coquettish, sweetness with an edge. "It was letting the sick little girl out to play," she says. Slightly less than half the album featured orchestral arrangements by Billy Ver Planck, a composer and bandleader who'd done music for *The Flintstones*. "I'd been watching a lot of afternoon cartoons like *Courageous Cat and Minute Mouse*, where the music was always so fantastic. I told Billy my ideas and he translated them, but he hated the end result because we massacred his compositions. At seventeen thousand dollars, that's the most expensive album I've ever done." It might also be her best record—certainly the easiest on the ear—but it didn't make her into the pop star Zilkha envisaged.

No Wave was an extremist gesture, the kind of cultural spasm that can only exhaust itself. "For Mars the scene ended just a couple of months after *No New York* came out at the end of 1978," says Mark Cunningham. "Max's closed and CB's was becoming more of a megarock club. We didn't feel we had a place anymore." New spaces like Hurrah's and Mudd Club started to take over, and the vibe of New York's music scene began to shift toward fun and dance. The James White project had anticipated disco punk, but Chance would not reap the benefits. After the original Contortions split, Chance played on with endlessly shifting backing bands, but problems with record companies, drugs, and Phillips's terminal cancer thwarted his career.

Lydia Lunch bounced between extremes, from the schmaltz noir of *Queen of Siam* to 8 Eyed Spy, an honest-to-goodness rock 'n' roll band. Grinding out snake-hipped boogie steeped in Americana and Faulkneresque Southern Gothic, 8 Eyed Spy covered Creedence Clearwater Revival and Bo Diddley. Lydia even wore a jeans jacket at one show to complete her white-trash image. "More than anything I consider myself a conceptualist," she says now. "I feel more akin to Marcel Duchamp than any musician ever. I wanted to contradict not just everything that preceded me but my own previous music, too." Lunch describes her self-confounding musical trajectory as "purposeful

and schizophrenic...contradictory, contrarian, conceptual,” words that distill the essence of No Wave itself.

TALKING HEADS, WIRE, AND MISSION OF BURMA

ROCK HAS NEVER REALLY made its mind up when it comes to the A-word. For some, “art” is rock ’n’ roll’s opposite—genteel, gutless, elitist. Punk was partly a revolt against the high-culture pretensions of post-*Sgt. Pepper*’s progressive music and art rock. The No Wave bands shared this suspicion of artiness. Many of them came from art school backgrounds or practiced various forms of art in addition to music, yet they strove to distance themselves from the SoHo scene, which was perceived as overly conceptual and nonvisceral.

Another New York band of this era, Talking Heads, felt a similar squeamish ambivalence about the A-word, despite being products of art college themselves. “I object to us being called ‘artists who have chosen the medium of music,’” sniffed the band’s keyboard player, Jerry Harrison. “I find that distasteful and very unfunky. And we don’t perform in galleries.” Singer David Byrne disliked “art rock” as a label because of its connotation of dispassionate dabbling, the implication being that Talking Heads didn’t “have sincere feelings about our music or we’re just flirting with rock and roll and we’re too reserved and detached to rock out onstage.”

Yet for all their misgivings about art rock as a category, Talking Heads wore their Rhode Island School of Design background on their sleeves (including their record sleeves, usually designed by members of the band). The earliest version of the group—formed by Byrne and drummer Chris Frantz at RISD, which they attended along with Tina Weymouth, Frantz’s girlfriend and future Heads bassist—was even called the Artistics. As Colin Newman from Wire (another group composed of fine-arts and design students) put it, his band’s music “wasn’t ‘arty,’ we were doing fucking *art*. Punk *was* art. It was all art.”

Conceptualism and performance art were at their height in the early seventies, and the nascent Heads assimilated a post-Fluxus sensibility of “serious play” that would later inform their approach to making music. Byrne, for instance, once did a performance that involved his shaving off a long beard he’d grown while a friend played accordion and his girlfriend held up cue cards with Russian words on them. Because he didn’t have a mirror, Byrne’s face ended up a bloody mess. This kind of performance art, along with the “photo-conceptual” and text-based work he was also doing—“fake photographs of flying saucers, questionnaires that I’d pass out anonymously,” recalls Byrne—were a bit outré for RISD, and the college advised him to go to New York where that sort of thing was all the rage.

By Christmas of 1974, Byrne had moved into a communal loft on the Lower East Side with Frantz and Weymouth. Its Chrystie Street

location was only a few scuzzy blocks from CBGB. Initially, though, Byrne felt the tug of New York's cinema and experimental theater more than the nascent punk scene. "Seeing performances by Wooster Group, Mabou Mines, Richard Foreman, all this nonnarrative theatrical stuff that was a collage of music, text, stylized movement. Things you never thought possible to sit there and enjoy—boom, they did it! None of it was logical or linear, and it had that attitude of mixing together high and low culture."

When Talking Heads began to play CBGB and Max's Kansas City, they stood out from the punk pack immediately with their clean-cut, non-rock 'n' roll image and anorexic sound. Byrne preferred a "thin, clean, and clanky" guitar sound rather the fuzztone-thickened chords of most punk. "I wanted it to sound like a little well-oiled machine where everything was transparent, all the working parts visible," says Byrne. "Nothing hidden in the murk of a big sound. Somehow that seemed more honest. And probably more arty as well." Because he mostly played rhythm guitar and didn't solo, Weymouth's bass became the band's second melodic voice after Byrne's singing. "It's an enormous temptation to play lead parts and melodies, especially as I play in approximately the same range as the human voice," Weymouth told *Melody Maker* in 1977. "I always tend to fill in the middle tones, because if I played very low bass there'd be this huge gap like the Grand Canyon between my bass and David's guitar."

With some help from contemporaries such as XTC and the Cars, early Talking Heads set the template for New Wave. The sound was as skinny as the ties worn by so many New Wave bands, consisting of choppy rhythm guitar (with hardly any lead playing), fast tempos, and often keyboards. The songs often had stop-start structures and melody lines that were angular and jumpy rather than gently curving. Talking Heads' early stage fave "Psycho Killer" virtually patented that twitchy New Wave feel of abruptness and agitation. "I always liked slightly herky-jerky, spastic rhythms. I gravitated toward those," says Byrne.

As part of its revolt against the "Old Wave," New Wave purged many of the black-music-derived properties—a relaxed jamming feel, swing, bluesy note bending—that innately juiced rock music in the sixties and early seventies. Devoid of raspy blues grit or rock 'n' roll drawl, New Wave vocals tended to be high pitched, geeky, and suburban. Punk and New Wave severed rock's links to sixties R&B while steadfastly ignoring the new directions since taken by black music with funk, reggae, and disco. Unlike the rest of their peers, though, Talking Heads always had a subtle funk pulse. Not in the "passing for black" sense of, say, Scottish funkateers the Average White Band, but a more "authentic" middle-class Caucasian take. You could hear the urge to get down, but checked and frustrated by an

uptight WASPishness—a square and stilted quality Byrne physically embodied onstage with what Barney Hoskyns called his “everything-is-so-normal-it’s-crazy!” persona.

Talking Heads’ rhythm section, Weymouth and Frantz, steeped themselves in funk and disco. Weymouth told *Sounds* that the couple jostled over the hi-fi controls—she boosting the bass, Frantz turning up the treble to hear the hi-hat patterns. Weymouth developed a style of playing bass using her thumb that was roughly equivalent to the slap-bass technique pioneered by Larry Graham from Sly and the Family Stone. “It gives an incredible piston action, like fuel-injectionfed,” Weymouth explained. Byrne, meanwhile, had started to believe that the production techniques in black dance music (disco’s extended remixes, the sumptuous layering, and thick textures of everyone from the Jacksons to Parliament-Funkadelic) constituted a bigger musical revolution than punk. “When you started getting people doing the early remixes—stretching the song out, chopping it up—it was great,” he recalls. “And it was all happening in the dance world, it wasn’t happening in the rock world at all.”

As if their art school backgrounds and disco sympathies weren’t enough, Talking Heads’ image also made them black sheep among the black-leather fraternity of CBGB. In the context of 1978—the soft-rock mainstream still dominated by perms and face-fuzz, punk hidebound by its own scuzzy style—the Talking Heads’ no-nonsense, “regular” image was both refreshing and a statement. “Some of those CBGB groups were really just continuing those rock ‘n’ roll romantic archetypes, the rebellious attitudes and stage postures and all those inherited gestures,” says Byrne. “I thought it wasn’t saying anything new, it was just a sloppier version of the Stones, the same clothes and the same pose. I thought: Let’s see if we can just throw all that out, start from square one. Walk onstage in your street clothes and sing with no affectation in a kind of unromantic but passionate way.”

Byrne had started dressing “straight”—short hair, suits, double-knit pants—back at RISD. This un-rock ‘n’ roll neatness was a dissident gesture against the let-it-all-hang-out mood of the early seventies. Back then, the only renegades against posthippie style and mores were Jonathan Richman and the Modern Lovers, from nearby Boston. Appropriately, when Talking Heads were looking to fill out their scrawny sound, they approached Jerry Harrison, formerly the Modern Lovers’ keyboard player, to join the band. Also crucial to the Heads’ unique look was the matter-of-fact presence of Weymouth, gamine and androgynous with her short Jean Seberg hairstyle. “I think we were the first band that had a woman as a *journeyman*, not the front person/singer/sex symbol of the band, but just a working musician,” Jerry Harrison once said, forgetting Mo Tucker in the

Velvets but being more or less on the money.

If Talking Heads had a polar opposite it was the Ramones, overgrown teenagers in black leather and torn denim. Curiously, both groups signed to the leading American New Wave label, Sire, and together embarked on a chalk-and-cheese tour of Europe in 1977 (with the Ramones thoroughly freaked by the way the Heads read *books* on the road rather than raised hell). Whereas the Ramones' rock 'n' roll classicism eventually led to their working with hit-making relic Phil Spector, during the tour's stint in London Talking Heads met the future-minded Brian Eno and immediately formed a mutual admiration society.

In a 1978 interview with *Search & Destroy*, Weymouth *gushed* about the Englishman's sensitivity, courtesy, intellect, and even his physical attractiveness. "You know what he reminded us of? A young Jesuit monk. And he was very handsome in person. Beautiful hands, very long, slender fingers. Very idealistic hands, I would say." Eno was equally captivated by the New Yorkers and recorded the tribute song "King's Lead Hat" (an anagram of "Talking Heads") on his solo album *Before and After Science*. "I think they're about the nicest four people I could ever hope to meet," he told *Melody Maker*. He admired their music for clearly being "the product of some very active brains, constructing music in a kind of conceptual way." The Eno/Talking Heads relationship was freighted from the start with a kind of mirror image narcissism. Eno embodied the very cerebral, well-brought-up qualities that made Talking Heads misfits at CBGB. The Englishman, in turn, saw the Heads as junior Enos, brilliant but still in need of a little avuncular guidance and nurturing.

In Byrne, especially, Eno found a soul brother. "It's like David said to me the other day, 'Sometimes I write something that I really can't understand, and that's what excites me,'" Eno told *Musician* magazine. "I felt such sympathy with that position." Words had always been a problem for Eno, "in that I didn't have anything to say," he confessed in 1977 (a blasphemous comment in the year rock's Meaning and Relevance returned with a vengeance). "I didn't have a message and I didn't have experiences that I felt strongly enough to want to write about.... All my favorite songs had lyrics which I didn't quite understand.... I decided I wanted these picture-lyrics." Instead of straightforward emotions like sorrow, anger, or joy, Eno preferred ambiguous mood-tones you couldn't quite finger. And he rejected rock's expressionist fallacy, the idea that emotive songwriting can only come from the personal depths. "There are some bands who want to give the illusion...that the music itself is the...result of incredible, seething passions and turmoil from within," Eno told *Creem*. "The way I work...is to create music that creates a feeling in *you*." Instead of

unbridled subjectivity, the songs on his post-Roxy solo albums came out of a literally *objective* approach: Musically, they were sonic sculptures fashioned out of all sorts of unusual instrumental textures and treated sounds, while the lyrics were shaped from “syllable-rhythm” nonsense or methodically generated through language games.

Byrne approached songwriting with exactly the same playful spirit. “I felt the challenge was to take something that was lyrically purely structural, had no emotional content whatsoever, but then invest the performance with leaps of emotion,” he says. In some Talking Heads songs, Byrne plays a character, as if the song were a minimovie. In others, he plays with language itself. But however fragmented the narrative, the language in Talking Heads was always plainspoken, the sound of conversation or inner monologue, rather than poeticized. When it came to subject matter, Byrne’s songs swerved past the things that occupy the vast majority of rock’s attention (love, sex, various kinds of rebellion and misbehavior) and instead explored the whole vast realm of *other stuff* that makes up the world (bureaucracy, TV, animals, appliances, cities). Graced with a melody that shimmers like a hummingbird dipping for nectar, “Don’t Worry About the Government” (from the debut album, *Talking Heads 77*) broke with rock’s tired tradition of “Mr. Jones” songs and instead empathized with office drones everywhere. Inspired by Maoist ideas and management theory, Byrne was playing with the notion—sacrilegious, in rockthink—that “uniformity and restriction don’t have to be debilitating and degrading.”

More Songs About Buildings and Food, the second album, was the first made with Eno. It turned out to be Installment Number One in an Eno-produced trilogy of classic albums that were hugely diverse but unified by a loose concept: psychedelic funk. Both band and producer had been listening closely to the recent output of Parliament-Funkadelic, which had an ultravivid palette of heavily effected instruments. This color-saturated quality was especially ear-catching when applied to the bass, an instrument normally played without much processing. Bootsy Collins’s glossy, elasticated sound made him the Jimi Hendrix of the bass guitar. Parliament also pioneered synth bass on tracks such as “Flashlight” (a massive U.S. R&B hit in 1978), with keyboardist Bernie Worrell stacking multiple Moog bass tones to create the most lubriciously gloopy B-line ever heard.

The songs on *Talking Heads 77* had all been written before Jerry Harrison joined, but with his keyboards integrated into the writing process on *Buildings and Food*, the group’s music grew ever more thickly textured. Eno loved creating strange, ultravivid timbres using effects and the studio as instrument. On *Buildings and Food* you can hear this chromatic quality at its most intense in the splashy, reverbed

drums at the start of “Warning Sign” and the famous “underwater” sound of the Heads’ cover of Al Green’s “Take Me to the River.” Released as a single, the latter gave the band their first *Billboard* Top 30 hit and was a striking gesture of racial border crossing at a time when New Wave was at its most starchy white.

With 1979’s *Fear of Music*, Talking Heads plunged deeper into white funkadelia, but the feel is decidedly late seventies—psychedelia as media-overloaded disorientation, not trippy serenity. The title was inspired by a real (if rather rare) phobia Byrne had read about, but the phrase “fear of music” obliquely distills the ominous mood of 1979, a year of geopolitical instability (the Iranian hostage crisis, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) and near catastrophe (the nuclear meltdown at Three Mile Island). Germany’s Red Army Faction (aka Baader-Meinhof) and the Symbionese Liberation Army (Patty Hearst’s kidnappers) inspired “Life During Wartime,” *Fear*’s only overtly topical tune. Byrne goes beyond the obvious excitements of being an undercover terrorist (always on the move, switching identities, carrying several passports) by imagining the character’s secret regrets—no time for “fooling around,” for romance or nightclubbing. Elsewhere, the symptoms of disquiet and malaise are more quirky. “Air” is the lament of someone so vulnerable that even contact with the atmosphere hurts (“Some people don’t know shit about the air,” he whines), while “Animals” features an Archie Bunker-type grouch ranting about the wildlife being irresponsible and generally “making a fool of us.” The subliminal undertow of tension pervading *Fear* makes it a sister album to 1979’s other postpunk landmarks, Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures* and PiL’s *Metal Box*. But unlike John Lydon and Ian Curtis, Byrne approached things in a more impersonal, elliptical manner.

Fear of Music represented the Eno/Talking Heads collaboration at its most mutually fruitful and equitable. By this point Eno felt that he and the four Heads had developed a group identity. His role encompassed being a kind of fifth player, “listening to what they were doing and picking out sounds and making new sounds from them... using delays to create new rhythms within their own,” and being an editor who spotted “little playing ideas that may have been accidents, or accidents of interaction” that the band might otherwise have missed. In a way, he’d become the group’s George Martin. Indeed, the trilogy of records Eno and Talking Heads made together recalls the runaway evolution of the Beatles across *Rubber Soul*, *Revolver*, and *Sgt. Pepper’s* in the way that each album’s most radical tracks became the starting point for the next record.

In *Fear*’s case, the most advanced pieces, in terms of their structure and methodology, were the opening “I Zimbra” and the closing

“Drugs.” “I Zimbra” combined Africa-influenced percussion, propulsive disco bass, and Byrne chanting nonsense syllables originally written and performed by Hugo Ball as dadaist sound poetry. “Drugs,” a slow, faltering groove riddled with hallucinatory afterimages and light streaks, evoked altered states. In order to nail the panic-attack vibe he wanted, Byrne tried to make himself hyperventilate. “I’d run around in circles until I was completely out of breath and then gasp, ‘Okay, I’m ready to sing the next verse!’” The most radical aspect of “Drugs” was its discombobulated gait and gap-riddled structure, full of lapses and phase shifts. “Brian and I tore the song down to its basic elements and then built it up again with new stuff, replaying certain parts and replacing certain instruments.” The resulting mosaic of live-band playing and sound collage was something almost impossible to reproduce onstage. “Drugs” was the germ of the next album, *Remain in Light*, on which the band would generate a mass of rhythms and riffs that were then sifted through and stitched together at the mixing board.

In the hiatus between *Fear* and *Remain*, Byrne and Eno launched a side project that also intended to expand on the ideas of “Drugs” and “I Zimbra.” The pair had become obsessed with African music. Byrne had long been a devotee of field recordings, but now he was reading books by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists like Robert Farris Thompson and John Miller Chernoff, experts on African civilization and the role of music in tribal societies. The project was initially conceived as a collaboration involving Eno, Byrne, and Jon Hassell, who coined the concept of the “Fourth World,” the merger of high-tech Western music and archaic ethnic music from all corners of the globe. The original idea for what became *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* was a fake field recording of a nonexistent tribe. “We’d invent a whole culture to go with it,” recalls Byrne. “There would be ethnographic sleeve notes and everything.”

Speaking to *Musician* in 1979, Eno talked about the three areas he and Byrne planned to weave together: disco funk, Arabic music from North Africa, and West African polyrhythms. “Things sound really messy, and it’s a kind of mess I’ve never had on anything before,” he enthused. “It’s a sort of jungle sound.” Soon a fourth element entered the picture: found voices. Eno and Byrne became fascinated with American radio’s menagerie of evangelist preachers, right-wing pundits, and callers phoning in to live talk radio shows. Radio, it seemed to Eno, was America’s seething id, its political unconscious. “In Britain or Europe, the presenters are picked for their qualities of calmness and obvious rationality,” he told the *Guardian*. “Here you get the nuttiest people in charge of the airwaves.” Tuning in to the born-again fundamentalists, they soon noticed “a contradiction” at the

heart of the ranting and raving, says Byrne. "Some of it was declamatory finger waving, but with a lot of the preaching there was this ecstatic element. The performance was saying the opposite of what the text was saying. The words were all 'thou shalt not' but the delivery itself was completely sexual. I thought, 'Great, the conflict is embodied right there.'" Similarly, the fervor of Baptist and Pentecostal congregations struck Byrne as "very similar to wild rock concerts or disco, the communal feeling where everyone gets swept up."

Collecting radio voices for their polyrhythmic collages, Eno and Byrne found themselves most attracted to the born-again Christian preachers because of their rocking-and-a-rolling speech patterns, midway between conversation and incantation. "When people speak passionately they speak in melodies," Eno told the *East Village Eye*. Eventually they asked themselves *why* the fundamentalists sounded better than the regular announcers, and concluded it was because they transmitted "a sense of energy and commitment to some belief or other"—a fervor that felt weirdly alluring against the bland backdrop of anomie and drift that was Carter's America. Byrne and Eno's project began to coalesce around a central idea, the contrast between the spiritual void of faithless liberalism and the rival (yet weirdly similar) fundamentalisms of East and West. The duo imagined creating a ritual music for the postmodern West—a physically grounded transcendence connecting the holy-roller madness of born-again Protestantism with African trance rhythms and Funkadelic's liberation theology of "dance your way out of your constrictions." Researching African music, Byrne marveled at the fact that the tribes made no distinction between dance music and religious music. Dancing *was* worship.

Musically, *Bush of Ghosts* took the techniques first broached in "Drugs" and "I Zimbra" to the next level. In search of ultravivid and ear-baffling timbres, Eno and Byrne drastically extended the sonic range of conventional instruments through processing and effects. Inspired as much by Steve Reich's cellular compositions as by African drum choirs, they explored a kind of maxi-minimalism, in which a multitude of instruments each played very simple parts but interlocked to form a complex, ever shifting mesh of textured rhythm. Two new approaches also informed the album: a "Fourth World" mix of the acoustic and the high-tech (so that hand percussion and the noise of wood mingled with state-of-the-art digital delays and synths), and a sensurround ambience that Eno called the "psychedelic wash."

Byrne's head was buzzing with all these ideas when he joined the rest of Talking Heads at Compass Point Studios in the Bahamas in spring 1980, to begin work on the group's fourth album, *Remain in Light*. Rather than start from Byrne's melodies, the group decided to jam out tons of raw material—riffs, vamps, rhythmic pulses—and

allow the songs to emerge later. The tracks were built up out of layers of percussion, tics of rhythm guitar, synth daubs, and multiple bass riffs (on “Born Under Punches (The Heat Goes On),” there were at least five basses, each doing simple one-or two-note pulses). Glyphs of keyboard coloration darted through the drum foliage like tropical birds. When it came to the vocal melodies, Byrne had to find new modes of delivery in order to weave his voice into this teeming, gleaming rain forest. He assimilated the radio preachers’ hypnotic cadences and commanding tones. He also picked up some tricks from early hip-hop and attempted a stiff-necked form of rapping on “Crosseyed and Painless.”

If *Fear* was about neurosis, *Remain* grasped for psychic wholeness, life newly reintegrated with nature and the body. Much of the album implicitly argued that Western values *suck*, they’re *sick*. “The Great Curve” was an ecofeminist rhythm-hymn to Mother Earth, its chorus (“The world moves on a woman’s hips”) inspired by the Yoruba’s Great Mother cosmology. “Listening Wind” makes us empathize with a North African man fighting neocolonialism by sending letter bombs and planting explosive devices. Says Byrne, “It’s the point of view of someone being swamped by the West, their lives and culture destroyed. His retaliation is so limited compared to the might of the global powers, it’s pretty easy to identify with—especially for someone who fancied himself an underdog in the music world.”

Remain in Light divides into “dry” and “wet” sides. The restless panoramas of side one’s triptych “Born,” “Crosseyed and Painless” and “The Great Curve” contrast with the flip side’s “Once in a Lifetime,” a rapt aquatic swirl, and the glistening dreamscapes of “Seen and Not Seen” and “Listening Wind.” *Remain*’s two sides make up a loose concept album. In “Born” and “Crosseyed,” Byrne’s protagonists are caged inside the clockwork grid of the industrial West, with its hamster wheel of schedules and time-is-money. In “Once in a Lifetime” a suburban man wonders how he ended up “here,” surrounded by beautiful possessions (house, car, wife). He’s “not upset or tormented,” Byrne explained, “just bewildered. And then in contrast the chorus is meant to convey a feeling of ecstatic surrender.” This shattering epiphany punctures the ordered absurdity of workaday life and opens up the possibility of rebirth and renewed wonder.

Or perhaps not, as “Once in a Lifetime” is followed immediately by the spooky “Houses in Motion,” in which a man is “digging his own grave” in daily installments of empty industriousness. *Remain*’s concept wasn’t especially original. In *The Waste Land* T. S. Eliot diagnosed Western soul sickness as a biorhythmic disconnection from natural cycles. There was also a tang of the sixties (Dylan’s “he not busy being born is busy dying”). Still, *Remain* brilliantly evoked both

the illness (the itchy rhythmic unrest) and its cure (deep trance, timeless flow). At the end of the album, though, modernity's malaise reasserts itself with "The Overload," a droning dirge inspired by Joy Division in a uniquely oblique fashion. Talking Heads never actually heard Joy Division's records, but had been intrigued by the record reviews. The whitest-sounding music on *Remain*, "The Overload" is also, appropriately, the most angst wracked, Byrne numbly intoning lyrics about missing centers, terrible signals, "a gentle collapsing." It's as if the African dream has dissolved, leaving the listener stranded once more in the psychic hollow lands of *Fear of Music*.

A masterpiece, then—but *Remain in Light* shook Talking Heads to the core. Making the record had involved deconstructing the band. Assigned roles got thrown into flux. For instance, everybody contributed keyboards and almost everybody played some bass. Recreating such multilayered music onstage required the expansion of Talking Heads into a nine-piece ensemble modeled on Parliament-Funkadelic (whose keyboard player, Bernie Worrell, was recruited, along with two other African Americans, backing vocalist Nona Hendryx and second bassist Busta Jones). Before the band even played a note, the racially and sexually mixed lineup of the expanded Heads made a multiculturalist statement, their onstage presence embodying the all-gates-open, communal uplift that *Remain* was precariously grasping for.

Offstage, however, tensions had emerged within the core quartet that could be traced back to the *Remain* sessions. In the studio Weymouth, Frantz, and Harrison would come up with material but had "no idea where it would end up," says Byrne. "Everyone was pretty enthusiastic about cutting the tracks at the start. But during the process of taking all the parts and forming them into songs, less people became involved. They probably felt a little bit left out. Their playing was still there but the vibe at the end might be completely different." A rift opened up between Weymouth, Frantz, and Harrison—effectively demoted to the level of session musicians—and Byrne and Eno, now incredibly tight. Emotions and loyalties were at stake as well as questions of creative control. "By the time they finished working together for three months [on *Bush of Ghosts*] they were dressing like one another," Weymouth sniped in one interview. "They're like two fourteen-year-old boys making an impression on each other."

The conflict extended to the fraught questions of writing credits and royalties. Song publishing traditionally assigns copyright to the composer of the top line melody and lyrics, but this was obviously inadequate for the radically decentered music on *Remain*. Eno, understandably, wanted appropriate credit for his role and pressed for

double billing: Talking Heads and Brian Eno. The band refused, but when the artwork came back Weymouth, Frantz, and Harrison were horrified to find the songs credited to Byrne and Eno. In the end, the back cover declared, “All Songs by David Byrne, Brian Eno, Talking Heads,” a compromise that satisfied nobody. Weymouth, Frantz, Harrison, and eventually Byrne, too, began to suspect that Eno was trying, consciously or unconsciously, to turn Talking Heads into his backing band—a new Roxy Music, but with Byrne far more amenable to Eno’s ideas than Bryan Ferry. “It wasn’t really a problem while we were making *Remain*, but when we were considering what to do next,” says Byrne. “By this point the others were fed up with me and Brian and our ideas. And I probably thought, ‘Okay, I won’t push it down their throats anymore.’”

For his part, Eno felt *Remain* could have gone so much further if he’d had carte blanche. He was also irritated that the album had effectively stolen *Bush of Ghosts*’s thunder. The Byrne and Eno album was originally meant to come out before *Remain*, but got delayed, partly because of legal wrangles over the use of one evangelist’s voice, partly because the *Remain* sessions gave the duo loads of new ideas for where to take *Ghosts*. Released in January 1981—four months after the massively acclaimed *Remain*—*Bush of Ghosts* felt like an afterthought, not the ambush of new ideas Eno had planned. It also caught a critical backlash. Some characterized Byrne and Eno as bloodless eggheads working in sterile laboratory conditions, while others chastised them as sonic neocolonialists appropriating Third World exotica.

Despite the doubters, *Ghosts* was a career peak for both men. Even more than *Remain*, the record’s panoply of tactile rhythms, disjointed pulse grooves, and eerily pitch-smeared arabesques of melody looked ahead to the innovations of sampladelic genres like hip-hop, house, and jungle. *Ghosts* both preempted and influenced albums as diverse as Public Enemy’s *Fear of a Black Planet*, DJ Shadow’s *Endtroducing*, A Guy Called Gerald’s *Black Secret Technology*, and Moby’s *Play*. According to Byrne, the record was obliquely affected by hip-hop, but not rap music as much as *breakdancing*. While working on the record in Los Angeles, the duo met dancer Toni Basil (who would later do the choreography in the video for “Once in a Lifetime”). Basil was working with body-popping troupes like the Electric Boogaloos and the Lockers. According to Byrne, “She was going to do a whole program of choreography based on these street dancers. Brian and I thought it was the most amazing dancing we’d ever seen and in some way the music we were doing was intended for her to use in some television program with these dancers. But it never panned out.”

Remain did well in Britain, where “Once in a Lifetime” was a hit

single, but in America, the album was Talking Heads' worst seller. "It was perceived as too funky for the rock stations, while the R&B stations, of course, didn't want to know either," says Byrne. "Once in a Lifetime" was never even released as a single in America (although the video did get heavy play on the fledgling MTV channel a year or so later). In pointed contrast with the uncommercial *Remain*, Tina Weymouth and Chris Frantz's delightfully poppy side project the Tom Tom Club was unexpectedly successful, scoring a big U.K. hit with "Wordy Rappinghood" and a ton of radio play in the United States with "Genius of Love." The latter was especially popular on black radio stations, whose listeners assumed the group was African American because the track was so damn funky.

All this added further impetus to the idea of ending the relationship with Eno. For the sake of unity, Byrne went along with the general feeling that the band needed to rediscover the "charm and tightness" of its earliest music. Call it vanguard fatigue. Weymouth talked of how the group "spent so many years trying to be original that we don't know what original is anymore." Byrne decided to strategically divide his energies, channeling his more experimental impulses into the plethora of side projects that were opening up for him (like *The Catherine Wheel* album, music he composed for a ballet by avant-garde choreographer Twyla Tharp) while making Talking Heads the outlet for his pure pop instincts. After dissolving rock into an oceanic swirl of ethnofunkadelia, Talking Heads did the least-expected thing and enjoyed a second act as a pop group.

BACK IN THE EARLY SEVENTIES, long before his fateful meeting with the Talking Heads in London, Brian Eno was a regular visitor to Watford Art College, where his friend Peter Schmidt was one of the main tutors. Schmidt painted the watercolor artwork for several Eno albums, but he is most known as the cocreator, with Eno, of Oblique Strategies, an I Ching-like set of cards with instructions and hints designed to help artists break through creative impasses. Oblique Strategies' subtitle is "Over one hundred worthwhile dilemmas" and its most famous maxim is "Honor thy error as a hidden intention." Other Oblique advice included "don't be afraid of things because they're easy to do," "retrace your steps," "turn it upside down," and "is it finished?" Fluxus in a box, Oblique Strategies essentially distilled the anything-goes sensibility that pervaded the more progressive British art schools (such as Watford) during the sixties and seventies. Recalling their spirit of mixed-media playfulness and boundary-smashing impudence, Eno hailed the fine-art schools of this era as

“one of the most highly evolved forms of liberal education available on the planet.... Really something quite extraordinary.”

When Eno came to Watford to help with projects, he and Schmidt would often get a lift back to London from another tutor, Hansjörg Mayer. Sometimes there would be another passenger in the car, a young student of Mayer’s named Colin Newman, who in a few years would become a founding member of Wire. “In my view humans are inherently creative,” says Newman, “but there is a process by which a particular individual becomes an artist, meaning that they can say they are an artist without being pretentious. If that happened at any given point to me it was during those car journeys. As soon as I stepped in that car I was no longer just a rather poor student but a friend and an equal, an artist sitting in a car with other artists. I could babble on about my ideas.”

With the exception of drummer Robert Gotobed, the members of Wire all came with an art school pedigree. Bassist Graham Lewis was a fashion graduate doing freelance design for London boutiques. Guitarist Bruce Gilbert, old for a punk at thirty-one in 1977, was an abstract painter who worked as an audiovisual-aids technician at Watford, which is where he met Newman. Seven years younger than Gilbert, Newman was studying illustration, but had gravitated toward the sound studio’s facilities for experimenting with tape. “Bruce and me specifically always brought a fine-arts mentality to Wire,” says Newman.

Wire had a meteoric rise. In February 1977, six months after forming, the group made their live debut at the Roxy, London’s equivalent to CBGB. Four months later they made their vinyl debut on the live compilation *The Roxy London WC2*, and by year’s end they’d released their debut album, *Pink Flag*. Like Talking Heads, Wire were right at the heart of the punk scene, yet never quite belonged there. They were misfits whose distanced artiness made them distinctive but also rubbed some people the wrong way.

Two words crystallize what Wire derived from art school: “method” and “design.” They approached making music with a *methodical* objectivity, thinking of their songs not as outpourings from their hearts and souls but as “pieces”—meaning “art works” but also lumps of sound-matter to be chipped away at, like marble for a sculpture. Like Eno, they approached creation with a what if/why not? curiosity, setting up processes and embracing artificial constraints just to see what would transpire.

Wire’s design sensibility encompassed the striking cover art on their records (the concept invariably devised, if not executed, by Gilbert and Lewis) and their highly contoured and geometric music. Even at its most punklike, there was a brutal elegance to the power

chords and riffs. One could almost visualize their music as clean lines, deliberate spacings, and blocks of texture. The name Wire itself was chosen as much for “its graphic quality,” says Lewis, as for its connotations (thin and metallic, electrical power lines). “It was short and stark and would look big on a poster even if we were bottom of the bill!” Onstage, Wire looked equally styled and monochrome, favoring clothes in shades of black, gray, and white, and lighting that avoided rock ‘n’ roll clichés in favor of harsh, glaring white spots. The band projected a glacial aloofness. Newman stood stock-still with eyes staring straight ahead, or struck stylized and frozen “rock star” poses.

What made Wire punk was their minimalism, their reductionist disdain for extraneous decoration. Initially, they arrived at their sound through removals and refusals. “It was a process of elimination, all the things we don’t do,” recalls Newman. “At the end of the process, the list of things we actually *did* do was quite short!” Solos were shed first. In their earliest days, Wire included another Watford student on lead guitar, but when he was hospitalized for six weeks, the group noticed that the music dramatically improved in the absence of his solos. “All the fat, all the meander, suddenly disappeared,” says Newman. “Everything was edited down drastically, the songs came down to one and a half minutes long.”

Brevity and severity became Wire’s hallmark, as heard on *Pink Flag*, which crams twenty-one compressed bursts of abstract fury into just thirty-five minutes. On an idle listen, Newman’s uncouthly enunciated mock Cockney could pass for standard-issue punk singing. But for all their aggression, the songs are as exquisitely etched as a finely honed haiku, and the absurdist song titles such as “Three Girl Rhumba” suggest that this isn’t mere ruckus for the Roxy rabble, but a conceptual enterprise. Many of the songs were written as acts of speculation. What would happen if you rewrote “Johnny B. Goode” using only one chord? (Answer: *Pink Flag*’s title track.) Newman composed “106 Beats That” on an agonizingly delayed train journey between Watford and London, during which he devised a complicated system of correspondences between the names of railway stations and guitar chords.

Wire’s lyrics, mostly written by Graham Lewis, were no less process oriented. His words for “106 Beats” came out of a failed attempt to write a lyric that only had one hundred syllables in it. “It turns out it’s got one hundred six, but that doesn’t matter because you’ve created a process.” He and Bruce Gilbert would play absurdist games with sense and nonsense, narrative and fragmentation. Because making statements or self-expression wasn’t the point, nobody was precious about the words. They were simply material to be messed around with. For instance, Newman wrote a lyric about a lion tamer,

which Lewis mostly didn't care for, so he went through replacing all the bits he didn't like. Hence the song's eventual title, "Ex Lion Tamer." Dismembering sequential narrative was a favorite Lewis tactic. The kaleidoscopic perceptions in Wire songs often managed to be closer to the fractured way we actually experience reality.

Lewis once talked of Wire's quest for what he called the X Factor, "a kind of fear...something that you don't understand." The idea is close to Eno's belief that art's biological function is to expose the listener to disorientation. "What art does for you is that it constantly rehearses you for uncertainty," Eno argued. Most reviewers, though, compared Wire's enigmatic lyrics and nonlinear dream logic to Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd rather than Eno's solo albums. This was an easy link to make since Wire were signed to Harvest, EMI's psychedelic/progressive imprint, whose founder Nick Mobbs had originally signed Floyd. "EMI thought Wire were gonna be part of a new psychedelia, the next Pink Floyd," Newman says. "EMI saw us as the progressive element coming out of punk, with longevity and a more artistic approach, doing slower pieces with more depth and space in the sound, and different noises that weren't just thrash, thrash, thrash."

Wire really started living up to those expectations with their second album, *Chairs Missing*. The record saw Wire's relationship with producer Mike Thorne (the EMI A&R man who'd originally recommended them to Harvest) deepen to the point where he became their very own Eno, shaping the overall sound by helping the group create unusual textures and effects. *Chairs Missing* reinvents psychedelia while preserving the group's signature quality of monochrome minimalism. The guitars have an ultravivid gloss that almost feels wet to the ear's touch. "French Film Blurred" is a vitreous shimmer. On "Being Sucked in Again" even the bass emits an unnatural glow, like fluorescent marble. Thorne had brought back a whole load of state-of-the-art effects units from the United States: MXR distortion, flangers, and new sound effects operating in what Thorne calls "the time domain, like delays and chorus pedals. The combination of delays with distortion sounded very exciting and different, so we just went full-tilt into that." Says Newman, "The MXR unit provided this very clean and un-heavy-metal distortion. 'I Am The Fly' is literally that sound, like glass. On *Chairs Missing* we were just *streets* ahead when it came to guitar sounds."

Practically a fifth member of the group, Thorne also played keyboards on *Chairs Missing*. In 1978, keyboards were still widely regarded with suspicion as somehow unpunk, but Wire got into the idea when they realized that their guitars were so heavily treated they might as well be synths. Soon it was vice versa, says Thorne. "We put

synths through distortion pedals and got this electric sound that wasn't a guitar or a keyboard but somewhere in between." This disorienting uncertainty about the instrumental provenance of particular sounds added to the album's hallucinatory feel.

For a towering postpunk classic, *Chairs Missing* garnered a surprisingly mixed reception in 1978. Praised to the marmalade skies by some reviewers, it was lambasted by others for its keyboards, for the lyrics' trippy whimsy, and for having longer songs (the opener, "Practice Makes Perfect," made a statement by being four minutes long, while "Mercy" almost reached six). *NME*'s Monty Smith accused the group of degenerating from *Pink Flag* to Pink Floyd in less than a year. But apart from the odd Electric Prunes-like guitar sound, the only real sixties throwback on the album was the single "Outdoor Miner," all Byrdsy honeyed harmonies and idyllic chiming chords. It was the closest Wire ever got to having a hit.

Liquid with assonance and internal rhyme—"face worker, serpentine miner, a roof falls, an underliner, of leaf structure, the egg timer"—the lyric to "Outdoor Miner" sounds like sensuous nonsense, a typical example of Wire reveling in language's melt-in-your-mouth musicality rather than meaning. In fact, it's obliquely inspired by a BBC radio program during which Lewis learned about a bug called the serpentine miner who lives inside holly leaves and eats chlorophyll. "When I listen to my singing on that I just crease up," Newman told *NME*. "I should be singing 'she loves me'...but what I'm singing about is insects." The genesis of other songs was equally whimsical. "French Film Blurred" came from Newman's attempt to watch a foreign movie on a TV with reception so poor he couldn't read the subtitles, forcing him to make up the dialogue, while "Marooned" was a fantasy vignette about an Arctic castaway resigned to his fate ("As the water gets warmer my iceberg gets smaller").

By their third album, *154*, Wire's music was growing almost oppressively textured. The glaze of overdubs and guitar treatments produced a ceramic opacity, forbidding and impenetrable. The sessions were tense, too. The pop-minded Newman and Thorne jostled with the abstractionist Gilbert and Lewis (who'd been making pieces at home on tape recorders and venturing into the ambient zones later explored in their post-Wire project, *Dome*). "The vessel we were in just started getting a little small for all of us," recalls Thorne, "because it was starting to cramp the ways in which we wanted to develop." The tension seemed to infuse the songs, which were unusually cold-blooded even for Wire. Sung by Lewis in a doomy baritone, the opener, "I Should Have Known Better," expressed animosity with steely precision: "I haven't found a measure yet/To calibrate my displeasure yet." Newman's "Two People in a Room" depicted

emotional conflict as stratagem and maneuver (“Positions are shifted/The cease-fire unlifted”) and obliquely evoked the disintegration of Wire into rival aesthetic camps. Ideas relating to number, measurement, and cartography limned the record, from songs such as “The 15th” and “Map Ref. 41°N 93°W” to the album title itself.

Released in September 1979, *154* garnered universal acclaim. The album possessed a sheer size of sound that suggested Wire could become a major band, but the group’s first real brush with the big time—a sixteen-date tour supporting the re-formed Roxy Music, a group they’d once admired greatly—soured them on the industry way of doing things. If the traditional high-stamina rockbiz route to success (heavy touring in order to build a fan base) wasn’t an option for Wire, neither was the pop strategy of daytime radio play and hit singles. All densely overdubbed guitars and stacked vocals, “Map Ref. 41°N 93°W,” the single off *154*, was majestic but its beauty was oddly remote, just like the cartographer’s-eye-view lyric, inspired by a flight over Iowa. As pop choruses go, “Lines of longitude and latitude/Define and refine my altitude” doesn’t exactly scream “chart potential.”

For “Map Ref. 41° N 93° W,” Wire decided to avoid the usual thing bands did to promote a single (conduct a short tour of the U.K.). Instead, they organized something special, a show called *People in a Room* that ran for four nights at the Jeanette Cochrane Theatre in London (part of the Central School of Art and Design). The show started with solo performances by each member of the band. Gilbert’s piece involved a black pushcart and a glass, into which a series of people poured water, while Newman’s Glenn Branca-style guitar drone symphony featured five people playing E, five playing A, and five playing D. When the band itself finally took the stage, Wire played a new fifteen-minute composition called “Crazy About Love.” Their gigs generally featured a high proportion of new material, but at the Jeanette Cochrane Theatre, Wire only played a couple of songs from *154*, destroying any promotional aspect to the event and pissing off EMI.

People in a Room was effectively a career suicide note. In February 1980, a terse announcement appeared in the music papers, accompanied by a scowling shot of Wire. The group and EMI had parted company, it declared, because of “a breakdown of communication” and the label’s “reticence to consolidate future plans and projects.” Wire were impatient to move forward, to shake up the standard industry ways of doing things. They’d conceived an ambitious advertising campaign for *154*—enigmatic posters on buses, ten-second advertisements on TV, all featuring nothing but the cryptic number 154—but EMI rejected the idea as too expensive.

According to Thorne, most of the more open-minded people at EMI had left, as the company took a turn at the end of the seventies toward playing it safe and putting out bottom-line-oriented releases. But Newman says Wire felt like they “were engaged in a creative project and had this very rich record company that we assumed would be excited by new ideas. We *wanted* to sell records. We were talking about video. This was before MTV, but I’d seen from watching children’s TV shows that pop videos were becoming very important. We had an idea for ‘Map Ref.’—hugely expensive, but we could probably have been persuaded to do something a bit cheaper if there had been a budget. But EMI said, ‘You can’t sell music on television, we’ve tried.’ Hilarious, considering what happened a year later with MTV! In hindsight, I can see how Wire really suffered from being ahead of our time. By 1980, if we’d been on a label that was willing to put money into a video, we would have been amongst the first generation of MTV bands, alongside Talking Heads.”

Unwilling to spend what it would take to make Wire happen as a pop group, EMI was equally disinclined to fund their more esoteric side. Their proposal of a sublabel similar to Eno’s Obscure imprint through Island (an outlet for a steady stream of experimental side-project releases, limited in appeal to hard-core Wire aficionados but cheap to produce) was rejected. “The head of EMI put it quite succinctly,” recalls Thorne. “Something like, ‘A record company is not an Arts Council.’ And to be fair, Wire had lost touch with the fact that a large record company has to show a return on their investment.”

The press release about the Wire/EMI split also announced an upcoming show at London’s Electric Ballroom in late February 1980. In a final impressive feat of perversity, instead of using this as a showcase to get another record deal, Wire decided to stage an absurdist extravaganza redolent of the dadaist cabaret revues of the early twentieth century. Each song in the virtually all-new set was accompanied by a daft spectacle. For “Everything’s Going to Be Nice,” two men tethered to an inflatable jet were dragged across the stage by a woman. Newman sang “We Meet Under Tables” dressed in a black knee-length veil. Lewis growled “Eels Sang Lino” accompanied and lit by an illuminated goose. During “Piano Tuner (Keep Strumming Those Guitars),” someone attacked a gas stove, while “Zegk Hoqp” featured twelve people with newspaper headdresses playing percussion. The audience, which contained a sizable contingent of people who still pined for *Pink Flag*-era punk ditties such as “12XU” and “Dot Dash,” were either baffled or chucked bottles at the stage. It was Wire’s last gig for five years. Without ever formally disbanding, the group dispersed. Newman pursued the melodic side of Wire across a series of solo albums. Meanwhile, Lewis and Gilbert unleashed a torrent of

experimental albums and EPs under the names Dome, Cupol, and Gilbert/Lewis, their abstract sound paintings often paralleling Eno's ambient series for the EG label.

SOME POSTPUNK AFICIONADOS consider Mission of Burma to be the American equivalent to Wire. Experimenting with song structure and sound texture with a similarly dry, methodical approach, the Boston band loved to play games with form and expectation. Unlike Wire or Talking Heads, MoB weren't an art school band as such, but they were definitely arty (as songs such as "Max Ernst" and the Magritte-inspired "This Is Not a Photograph" indicate). Their conceptual bent came from a different kind of high-art background, classical music college.

In the midseventies, guitarist/vocalist Roger Miller had started a composition major at CalArts—"writing very complex piano scores and pieces for percussion trios," he says—only to quit because "academia didn't suit me." By early 1978, Miller had moved to Boston, his plan being to do experimental work involving tape loops and prepared piano. Instead, he joined a New Wave band called Moving Parts. He hit it off with the group's bassist Clint Conley, and the pair, keen to do more aggressive music, split off in 1979, recruiting drummer Peter Prescott, who'd previously played in the art rock band the Molls (in which the lead instrument was bassoon!), to form Mission of Burma.

When punk rock came along, Miller had been "just blown away by these people who could barely play guitar. I could play complex pieces by Schoenberg, but things like the Sex Pistols meant more to me than complexity." But in Mission of Burma, the complexity slowly crept back in. "I think we're just a closet prog-rock act that happened during punk," laughs Conley. "We were attracted to the velocity and volume of punk, but at the same time Roger and I were both really attracted to composition." As the raw blasting power of punk gave way to postpunk's unlikely amalgams of minimalism and sophistication—Wire, Gang of Four, the No Wave movement, Pere Ubu, all admired by Mission of Burma—Miller's training suddenly became relevant. The result was "avant-garde music you can shake your fist to," as one critic famously put it. Live, Mission of Burma were an art *attack*, playing their music with dispassionate ferocity and at earsplitting volume.

Where Conley tended to write and sing the more melodic, shout-along tunes such as "Academy Fight Song" (MoB's debut single) and "That's When I Reach for My Revolver," Miller's tunes resembled

partially dismantled anthems. The sheer noise assault of the MoB live experience seemed to signify rock, but their songs generally frustrated the simple rock-out impulse. This combination of visceral and cerebral meant that Mission of Burma were “sort of an acquired taste,” Conley told one interviewer. “We heard it over and over again throughout our career that people would see us the first time and it just wouldn’t make any sense at all. Listening to our live tapes, I know what they’re talking about. Sometimes it’s just like chewing gravel or a visit to the dentist’s office.” Miller recalls playing Danceteria in New York “with four hundred people in the room, and by the third song there’d be six left!” Says Conley, “I always felt like we were just interrupting people! They’d be dancing to the latest sounds from England, and we’d come on and make a big mess, and then they’d go back to their fun.”

After existing as a power trio for a brief period, Mission of Burma acquired a fourth member, an Eno-like figure named Martin Swope who intensified the group’s arty aura considerably. His role wasn’t to act as the group’s producer, though, but was closer to Eno’s position in early Roxy Music. Swope contributed tape treatments and phantom sound effects, both in the recording studio and at live shows, but he never appeared onstage with MoB, working instead at the venue’s mixing board. “What Martin did,” Prescott explained, “was tape something that was going on live, manipulate it, and send it back [into the sound system] as a sort of new instrument. You couldn’t predict exactly how it would sound, and that got to be the really fun thing.” Audience members would hear eerie sounds within the group’s onslaught of noise and be unable to work out which member of the visible trio was responsible. But other sound mirages were also being generated by the sheer volume at which the group played, and by Miller’s and Conley’s fondness for open tunings. “Just between the way Clint played bass, the wash of Pete’s cymbals, and my harmonics, you could hear new melodies in there,” says Miller.

In his classic book *Rock and the Pop Narcotic*, Joe Carducci wrote about how he “never felt MoB were truly a contemporary band,” that underneath the postpunk trappings, they were a throwback to psychedelia. Indeed, as a teenager at the end of the sixties, Miller had played with his brother in Sproton Layer, a band heavily influenced by Syd Barrett-era Pink Floyd, while the early seventies saw him exploring free jazz and drumming in the post-psychedelic experimental band Destroy All Monsters. The collision of all these freak-rock influences with the more “dry” postpunk sensibility explains the conflicted quality of the Mission of Burma experience. The music invites the listener to lose himself in its headfuck noise, but this flip-your-wig impulse is checked by the Gang of Four/Wire-like qualities of tension and rigor.

Mission of Burma's six-song EP *Signals, Calls, and Marches*, released in 1981, didn't really capture the Rorschach rush of the band's live fury. Thanks to its typically postpunk production (dry and clean), *Signals* came out "kind of arid, it just didn't have the blood and guts of when we played live," says Conley. The artwork exhibited significant postpunk damage, too. The cover was originally intended to be raw cardboard, the ultimate in minimalism, but for technical reasons, they used a photograph of cardboard, which actually made it even more conceptual. The lyric sheet took all the words used in the songs and arranged them in alphabetical order.

Mission of Burma made good on *Signals*'s sonic deficits with their first album, *Vs.*, which was recorded live in the studio. "We'd do, like, short sets, five songs in a row, over and over, and gradually weeded out the best takes," recalls Miller. It captured the overwhelming quality of Burma onstage, the clangor and barely controlled chaos. But although the album was critically acclaimed, Mission of Burma continued to have problems expanding their audience. Their noise deluge was mind-blowing, but the group didn't traffic in the sort of period trappings (sonic or sartorial) that would make them fit the neopsychedelic scene. Their earlier singles had been well produced enough to become college radio favorites, but *Vs.* was too much of an assault. In 1983, they called it a day, mainly because of Miller's worsening tinnitus condition, but also because they felt like they were banging their heads against a wall. Still, in their brief existence, MoB did establish an enduring following of brainiac postpunkers. This cult stature continued to accumulate after their demise to the point where, some twenty years after splitting up, the group re-formed and toured, playing to huge, fervent audiences that far surpassed anything they'd experienced the first time around, and as a result recorded a brand-new studio album, 2004's *ONoffON*. At roughly the same time as MoB's return to the stage, Wire (who'd already reunited once already, in 1985, to make a series of poppy albums) re-formed again and unleashed 2002's *Read & Burn*. This *Pink Flag*-redux EP unloosed a scorching, almost vindictive blast of noise that made most of the neopunk then being made by kids thirty years Wire's junior look hopelessly feeble.

THE LONDON VANGUARD

YOU STEP INTO THE ROOM and immediately stumble against a typewriter lurking on the dingy brown carpet. A small tower of books perches precariously on top of the machine. Next to it lays a half-drunk mug of coffee, its surface coated with a film of green-gray mold. Jutting stacks of pamphlets, newspapers, and academic paperbacks sprawl across every available surface—TV, mantelpiece, even the top of the gas heater—while the bookshelves look close to collapsing. On the wall above the fireplace, poking through an overlapping foliage of gig flyers and activist leaflets, there's a seven-inch single and a framed hammer and sickle with a used teabag dangling irreverently off the blade. And there's...hang on a second. *Jesus!* What's that dreadful smell in here?

On the front cover of Scritti Politti's 1979 EP *4 A Sides*, there's a photograph of the living room at their squalid squat in Camden, North London. It's a snapshot of a lifestyle: theory-addled, amphetamine-stoked conversations raging until the crack of dawn, fevered debates about the radical potentials and counterrevolutionary pitfalls of popular music, punctuated by visits to illegal reggae parties and postpunk gigs at the Cryptic One Club. The group's home and headquarters at 1 Carol Street was the site of an outlandish experiment in rock. Scritti conceived of itself as an anonymous collective involving not just the three band members but also nonmusicians whose participation might be "all talk" but nonetheless counted as a vital contribution. The core band consisted of singer/guitarist Green, drummer Tom Morley, and bassist Nial Jinks, but the total membership of the collective, which regularly gathered for formal meetings, was as high as twenty. "The idea is that substantial decisions about what the group is doing are made by a larger number of people than actually pick up instruments at present," Green told one fanzine. Scritti aren't the only band to commune in rock history (other examples include Jefferson Airplane, Faust, Amon Düül, and U.K. anarchopunks Crass) but the idea of a group where players were outnumbered by nonmusicians was unique.

Growing up in Wales, fifteen-year-old Green (then still using his surname, Gartside) and his school friend Nial Jinks had tried to form a branch of the Young Communist League. A few years later, Green studied art at Leeds Polytechnic at a time when conceptualist approaches were in the ascendant. But this brand of conceptualism was starkly different from the playful, process-oriented art school sensibility that informed Wire and Talking Heads. Influenced, like his Leeds contemporaries Gang of Four and the Mekons, by Art and

Language's hard-core critical sensibility, Green would come to think of that style of post-Eno art punk as "formalism," decadent and disengaged, arty for artiness's sake. Scritti had a *political* motivation for messing with musical structures. They wanted to create revolutionary consciousness through the radicalization of form as much as through their politically radical lyrical content.

Soon after arriving at Leeds Poly, Green had stopped painting in favor of producing only writing. This was conceptualism's next step, keeping the concepts and ditching the actual artistic practice, the idea being that before you created anything, you really ought to work out what was actually valid. Initially, Green had been attracted to Leeds Poly by its free-for-all spirit and performance art, but now he found this self-indulgent and lacking in theoretical grounding. Provocatively, he started a kind of countercurriculum within the art department, a popular lecture series involving talks from members of Art and Language. "I was encouraging all these people to come and basically say what was going on in our faculty was a crock of shit and everybody was wasting their time," Green chuckles.

This kind of combative meta-awareness infused the whole Scritti project. Scritti latched on to theory as a crucial tool for navigating the quandaries of "after-punk." What "ways of going on" (as Green liked to phrase it) are misguided or counterproductive? This is where the nonmusician members—who coalesced around the group after Scritti moved down to London—played their role, forming a buzzing theory hive that subjected "rock discourse" to rigorous scrutiny, interrogating all its assumptions and conventions.

Fans of traditional English music, Green and Jinks had dabbled with playing "jigs and reels," the singer recalls, but after the "Damascene moment" of seeing 1977's Anarchy Tour when it reached Leeds, Green persuaded Jinks to abandon his fiddle for an electric bass and convinced their friend Tom Morley to blow the rest of his student grant on a drum kit. Although it was the Anarchy Tour bands such as the Clash that had inspired Scritti's formation, Green and his cohorts soon became disillusioned by what they saw as the failure of the first-wave punk groups. In Scritti's debut single, "Skank Bloc Bologna," there's a brief, sardonic allusion to the Clash's idea of themselves as the "Magnificent Seven." Green told one fanzine about how he read an interview with the Clash in which they compared themselves to the posse of vigilante heroes in the famed Western, "a bunch of outlaws that would come into town to put everything to rights." The last verse of "Skank Bloc Bologna," he explained, punctured this "silly over-romanticized notion" of the rock group as "macho gunslingers, the Robin Hoods of today." The sound of "Skank Bloc Bologna" is a long way from the guerrilla bluster of the Clash's *Give 'Em Enough Rope*,

also released in the fall of 1978. The loping, white-reggae groove of the bass and drums, overlaid by Green's plangent guitar (closer to folk rock than punk rock), sounds dejected rather than martial.

As for the song's mysterious title, the "Skank" refers to the dub reggae that was the constant soundtrack to life in the Scritti squat. The "Bloc" alludes to a concept invented by one of Scritti's favorite neo-Marxist theorists, Gramsci, the notion of the "historic bloc," an alliance of oppressed classes uniting to overturn the existing order and overhaul the dominant, "commonsense" worldview of what's natural, ordained, even possible. Revolution, for Gramsci, meant creating a new *reality*.

The "Bologna" in the title is another story. It's often said that in Italy 1968 never ended. Unlike in other countries, that year's political unrest didn't subside but continued spasmodically through the end of the seventies, with wildcat strikes and industrial sabotage. Students seized control of universities, squatters occupied buildings, and an anarcho-surrealist tribe called the Metropolitan Indians staged mass shoplifting raids at luxury stores. All this insurgency was aimed as much against Italy's established political Left (at its peak, Italy's Communist Party controlled many major cities in the industrial North) as it was against conservatives. In early 1977, Bologna's Communist mayor lost control of the city to a riotous coalition of autonomists and counterculture radicals. This "Bloc" of squatters, feminists, gays, students, nonunionized workers, and the semiemployed developed an ad hoc form of postpolitical politics. Self-organized and carnivalesque, *il Movimento*—as it was dubbed—aimed not to seize power but to smash it altogether, leaving everybody and nobody in charge. The Bologna riots of 1977 were as much a form of cultural revolt as a political uprising, what Italy had in lieu of punk, some say. But the mayor denounced the rioters as bohemian nihilists and enemies of the true proletariat and after several weeks called in armored cars to crush the insurrection.

The title "Skank Bloc Bologna" seems to imagine the Scritti squat as an *autonome* cell, the germ of a future *Movimento Inglese*. Yet the actual tone of the song is desolate. The verses zoom in on a girl adrift. The hapless, literally *hopeless* product of bad education and stifled imagination, she has no sense that change is even possible. Green sounds like he's fighting his own despair. In sleepy London town, revolution seems a long way off. But even if the girl doesn't know it, "Something in Italy/Is keeping us all alive." Closer to home there's "the magnificent six" (the number in the Scritti collective at that point). With their Carol Street schemes and dreams, "They're working on a notion and they're working on a hope/A Euro vision and a skanking scope."

Inspired by the Desperate Bicycles, Scritti grubbed together the money to record “Skank” and two B-sides and, with financial help from Rough Trade, released it on their own St. Pancras label. On the photocopied sleeve they went one better than the Desps in the demystification stakes, itemizing the complete costs of recording, mastering, pressing, printing the labels, etc., and even listing contact numbers for companies who provided these services. Released in autumn of 1978, “Skank” sold out its first pressing of 2,500 quickly, thanks partly to the support of Radio One’s John Peel, and eventually moved around 15,000 copies. The melody’s off-kilter beauty and the plaintive melancholy of Green’s singing (indebted to the “English soul” of Robert Wyatt), along with the intrigue of the lyrics and that cryptic title, captured the imagination. Even the group’s name, a corruption of the title of a book by Gramsci, stood out for its sheer sound, “scrit-tee po-littee,” brittle and chiming, just like the upward-spiraling peals of lead guitar that pierce “Skank Bloc Bologna.” It didn’t hurt that Scritti looked good, too. Tom the drummer had blond dreadlocks (at that time a striking fashion statement) while pretty boy Green was the incarnation of intellectual glamour—thin and frail looking in an oversize sweater, with kohl pencil etched around his blazing eyes.

Scritti played their debut gig on November 18, 1978, at Acklam Hall in Ladbroke Grove, on a bill that included prag VEC and Rough Trade bands Cabaret Voltaire and the Red Crayola. High-strung at the best of times, Green was almost crippled with stage nerves. Sue Gogan, prag VEC singer, recalls, “He was in hysterics and needed to have a substantial ego massage before he could be persuaded to go on and do a stunning fifteen-minute set.” The set was so short because the group only had four songs. Despite Green’s caveat that the performance be taken as merely “an open rehearsal,” it was rapturously received, with the audience insisting Scritti play the entire set again. At the end of the night they were offered support slots on two different tours.

“Mark E. Smith said Scritti had the best rhythm section in the country,” recalls Geoff Travis of Rough Trade, who put out the *4 A Sides* EP. Scritti gigs were edgy, combustible affairs, with songs being made up on the spot, a practice Green found draining, but which he pursued out of an ideological commitment to discarding rock’s stale routines. Adding to the turbulence and cacophony—blades scratched along bass strings, tons of echo on the vocals and reverb on the tom toms—the group was often joined onstage by as many as twelve associate members of the collective, who would contribute either musically or by their symbolic presence.

Journalist Ian Penman appeared onstage with Scritti sometimes,

blowing free-form saxophone. "Or I would get up and, well, *rap*, I guess you would have to call it these days!" he recalls. "Cut up a Lenin text and cross-reference it with Lee Perry's 'Bafflin' Smoke Signals.' You have to understand, we took a *lot* of speed back then." A member of Scritti's "odd conglomerate," Penman often hung out at the squat, where he might compose a Scritti communiqué or participate in some of the group's interviews. He also acted as a sort of fifth column by sneaking Scritti jargon and buzz phrases into his *NME* reviews. Penman recalls his Scritti days as an amphetamine-filled blur of book swapping and cerebral frenzy. "New records would be seized upon and reviewed en masse, gigs attended and feverishly discussed for days and days afterwards." The soundtrack to all this "speed talk" would be dub, Robert Wyatt, avant-jazz chanteuse Annette Peacock, and English folk minstrels such as Martin Carthy and the Albion Band. Anything but straight rock.

Overtaking the Desperate Bicycles, Scritti became icons of DIY, supreme exponents-cum-theorists of a willfully fractured style of music making, "messthetics," as Green christened it in the manifesto song of the same title. In an interview with *After Hours* fanzine, he enthused about the new crop of "scratchy-collapsy groups" such as the Raincoats, saying, "We enjoy very much the enthusiastic, stop-start mistakes, falling-over sound they have."

Scritti's interviews from the early days created an intriguing image of a shadowy collective skulking on the periphery of the music scene and exploring some fabulously uncompromised and far-reaching outer limit of politics and pop. In a song such as "Is and Ought the Western World," in which the lyrics oscillated line by line between the prosaic details of everyday oppression and the abstract contours of deep political structure, it was clear that Scritti had advanced beyond Gang of Four's schematic case studies, just as the Gang themselves had moved beyond Tom Robinson's tell-it-like-it-is protest.

Green became a kind of theory guru to many in the postpunk scene. His eloquence and the fastidious complexity of his thinking were attractive at a time when punk was fragmenting. In the chorus of "Messthetics" Green declared, "We know what we're doing," by which he meant that the music was fractured on purpose. But in a larger sense Scritti convinced lots of people that they did know something nobody else did, or at least were thinking more rigorously about the crucial quandaries than the competition.

Prominent among the ideas whizzing about was Gramsci's concept of "hegemony," a catchall term that covers the official ideology of state, church, and other institutions along with the more diffuse and subliminal "commonsense" assumptions that hold a social system together. In Scritti's brittle ditty of the same name, Green personifies

“Hegemony” as “the foulest creature that set upon a race.” He sounds racked, singing, “How do you *do* this?/How can you do it to me?” like he’s desperately struggling to free himself from hegemony’s mental tentacles. In the chorus, the group derisively recites the sort of mundane platitudes that serve as hegemony’s glue: “A honest day’s pay for a honest day’s work,” “You can’t change human nature,” “Some are born to lead and others born to follow.” At song’s end, they mock the clichés that preserve rock’s own stasis quo: “Rock ‘n’ roll is here to stay,” “But can you dance to it?,” “Walk it like you talk it.”

Scritti increasingly focused on language itself as the mechanism of oppression. On the sleeve of the group’s third release, the *Peel Sessions* EP, a page from the imaginary book *Scritto’s Republic* proposes the idea of language as a sort of conductive fluid for power, permeating our consciousness and constructing “reality.” On “P.A.s,” the last track on *4 A Sides*, Green sings about 1920 in Italy and 1933 in Germany as moments when “the language shuts down.” In his most honeyed, airy tones, he ponders the mystery of popular support for totalitarianism: “How did they all *decide*?/What was irrational/Is national!” Then he imagines mass unemployment making the same thing happen in eighties Britain.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, another of Green’s theory gods, argued that all of humanity’s problems stem from our bewitchment by language. The problem, then, was: How do you think your way out of the cage when the only tools are *made* of language? The fraught energy of *4 A Sides*’s “Bibbly-O-Tek” wilts away with the bleak aside “which reminds me, there’s no escape,” before rallying itself for the struggle. Throughout *4 A Sides*, the sheer joy and fervor of music making itself triumphs. “Doubt Beat” sounds resolute, Morley’s driving drums and Jinks’s wriggly, tuneful funk bass conjuring what Gramsci called “optimism of the will” as a bulwark against the lyrics’ “pessimism of the intellect.” The *Peel Sessions* EP, though, sounds like the document of a group that’s foundering. The music feels like it’s shaking itself apart. Green sounds harrowed by thought. “That’s a genuinely ill record,” Green said of the EP some years later. “As some kind of index to my state of mind at the time I find it frightening and I can’t understand it now at all.”

The group’s hard-core lifestyle of self-neglect and self-abuse—not sleeping, eating infrequently, gobbling stimulants, the malodorous squalor of life in the Carol Street squat (which had no bathroom)—took its toll. The stern regime of questioning everything and constant ideological wariness wore Scritti down, too. An abortive recording session in mid-1979 intended to produce a couple of EPs went terribly wrong as the group’s formidable powers of critique turned upon themselves and nothing they produced seemed worthwhile. At the

extreme, Scritti's impulse to challenge every aspect of "the rock process" (even the word "rock" was suspect, Green preferring "beat music") could resemble Maoist self-criticism tribunals, where party members rebuked themselves for counterrevolutionary and crypto-bourgeois tendencies. "It was all tunneled through Green's absolutely monomaniacal insistence on what was *correct*," observes Penman. "He spent most of his time disapproving of things, like an unwashed Pope."

Scritti's mind-set started to get embattled, even paranoid. One minute Green proposed dismantling the entire capitalist structure of competition between bands ("Why can't Western rock bands work like jazz musicians—sharing equipment and ideas, helping each other at just that basic level of co-operation?" he pondered), and the next he was describing a battle to "win space," which translated as displacing rivals like the Pop Group by discrediting them ideologically.

There was a hefty component of pure ego involved in Green's intellectual combativeness, too. Typical of Scritti's abrasive interactions with "opponents" was their encounter with the genial improvisers of the London Musicians' Collective, also based in Camden, with headquarters a mere few yards from the Engineer, a pub whose back room, according to LMC cofounder Steve Beresford, had become "the court of Scritti." One evening after the Scritti collective attended an LMC performance, everybody retired to the Engineer, where there was a huge ideological row between the two postpunk factions. Beresford recalls Green "denouncing the bourgeois imperialist improvisers and claiming that *he* was playing '*people's* music.'" For Green, the LMC represented "formalist" experimentation at its most self-indulgent and whimsy addled.

Founded just before punk, in 1975, the London Musicians' Collective was conceived as an open-to-all alternative to the existing Musicians Co-Op, which was closer to a members-only guild. British improvisational music culture had definite affinities with punk. Being such a small scene, it pioneered a do-it-yourself approach from the early seventies onward, with independent labels such as Incus and publications like the "squabblezine" *Musics*. "There were anarchist ideas floating around," says David Toop, another LMC cofounder, and notions of incompetence as a liberating force had filtered down from Fluxus and John Cage to inform outfits such as the Portsmouth Sinfonia, an orchestra in which everybody played an instrument at which they weren't fully proficient. Sinfonia participants included Brian Eno and Steve Beresford.

The LMC believed in bringing together ultravirtuoso improvisers and nonskilled naïfs at events like their Jazz Punk Bonanza festival. "At the time, I was more interested in playing a sort of electric noise

music, so I really liked the chaotic side of punk,” says Toop. He and Beresford especially loved the exuberant, primitivistic racket of the early Slits. Says Beresford, “It was hilarious the way they chanted one-two-three-four at the start of each song, not to count in the beat, but because they thought that’s what punk bands *did* as a ritual. And Palmolive’s drumming was amazing, like speech rhythms.” Beresford actually ended up *in* a later incarnation of the Slits, providing “daft noises” on flügelhorn, keyboard, and toy instruments during an American tour.

By 1979, postpunk’s scope had widened so far that its activities overlapped with the prepunk experimental fringe, and musicians such as the Slits’ Viv Albertine began to gravitate toward the LMC, a place where absolutely anybody could play. The LMC space, in a building formerly owned by British Rail, “was filthy and had terrible acoustics,” says Beresford. There was usually no PA system and, according to Toop, a fair proportion of the four or five gigs per week had “no redeeming qualities at all.” Despite all this, the LMC became a real vortex. Its hallmark was fluidity, endless one-off collaborations, musicians being involved in several different groups at once, and so forth. All this polymorphous shifting and drifting represented an attempt to deconstruct the conventional rock band. These loose conglomerates operating on the boundary between music and noise seemed a world away from pop’s melodic sweetness, brand recognition, and long-term careers. And yet the LMC would outdo the entire postpunk world when the Flying Lizards—a Dada-pop outfit featuring contributions from Toop and Beresford, among others—scored a U.K. chart hit bigger than any achieved by PiL or Joy Division.

In the autumn of 1979, the Flying Lizards cover of “Money (That’s What I Want)” took the avant-classical sound of “prepared” instruments into the U.K. Top 5. The bass drum on the single isn’t a drum at all but a bass guitar being hit with a stick, while the banjolike piano sound was created by throwing objects—rubber toys, a glass ashtray, a telephone directory, a cassette recorder, sheet music—inside the piano. Cowritten by Motown founder Berry Gordy, Jr., “Money” is most famous as recorded by the Beatles in 1963. The Flying Lizards’ cover sounds like the Fab Four decided to rerecord it circa “I Am the Walrus.” The distortion-overloaded guitar solo gesticulates wildly like an overexcited man and the backing vocals sound like tribespeople chanting in the rain forest. Lead singer Deborah Evans replaces Lennon’s lusty working-class rasp with icily enunciated aristocratic disdain.

The mastermind behind Flying Lizards was David Cunningham, whom Toop originally met while teaching at Maidstone College of Art.

Cunningham wasn't really a musician so much as a self-taught producer, a scholar of record production, in fact, who listened closely to auteurs such as Joe Meek, Phil Spector, and Lee Perry. In a strong bargaining position after the success of "Money," he negotiated a deal with Virgin that defined Flying Lizards as a production company and allowed Cunningham to work with a range of musicians, which over the course of two albums would include the Pop Group's Bruce Smith, composer Michael Nyman (Cunningham's mentor at Maidstone), and Robert Fripp.

An exercise in pop absurdism, the self-titled debut album from the Flying Lizards featured a Brecht-Weill cover, Sanskrit chants, found sounds, and unlikely instrumental textures. Cunningham's penchant for excessive studio processing and daft effects intensified the spirit of whimsical artifice that infused the whole project. Still, Cunningham insisted that there *was* "a kind of punk element to the Flying Lizards," if punk meant simply that you could "do what you felt like doing." In fact, his idea of punk in 1977 hadn't been the Clash but This Heat, a highly experimental outfit whose attempts to fuse sonic radicalism and political rage rivaled the infernal intensity of the Pop Group. Cunningham ended up managing This Heat and coproducing their debut album.

Formed a few years before punk, This Heat originated from the same milieu as King Crimson and Soft Machine. There were still audible after-traces of "progressive" in This Heat's music, especially the plaintive, Robert Wyatt-like vocals. But mostly their sound was determined by late-seventies dread and a spirit of headfuck extremism inspired equally by dub, *musique concrète*, and sixties free jazz. This Heat's slogan was: "All possible processes. All channels open. Twenty-four hours alert."

Believing that "anything was potentially a source of music," as drummer/vocalist Charles Hayward put it, This Heat collected piles of "broken instruments, damaged toy pianos, half-functioning speaking dolls." Nonmusician Gareth Williams played a vital role. "Sometimes it would just be down to him playing one note on a keyboard for twelve minutes and slowly manipulating all these effects pedals, making music out of that one note," recalls Hayward. "It was a refocusing of what 'technique' was. Instead of *andante* or *legato* it would be 'angry' or 'stumbling over.'"

The year 1977 provided This Heat with a climate in which their "desire to commit violence to accepted notions of music," as Hayward puts it, suddenly made perfect sense. "There was a wellspring of punk possibility that accepted and nurtured us, even though we weren't part of it," says Hayward. Through David Cunningham, This Heat got access to a studio called Cold Storage, a former meat fridge in a

disused South London pie factory, which enabled them to undertake prolonged, in-depth experiments with tape editing. For their self-titled 1979 debut LP, they spliced together lo-fi live recordings with twenty-four stereo tracks recorded at another, more high-tech studio, creating a disconcerting friction of ambiances.

Yet, This Heat's music wasn't a formalist-style experiment for its own sake, but abstract protest music, seething with rage and commitment. Nineteen eighty-one's *Deceit* was almost a concept album about nuclear Armageddon. The opener, "Sleep," depicts the System lulling people into apathy with consumerism and entertainment, "a life cocooned in a routine of food." Like so many of their postpunk peers, This Heat wanted to awaken listeners to an acutely discomforting awareness of the world's evils. The music itself, through its fractures and internal clashes, instills a painful alertness. "That's why our music wasn't psychedelic and drifty, why it was so hard edged and angular. We had no interest in making people *stoned* with our sounds," Hayward says. The band also projected this ferocious sobriety via their image. *Deceit*'s back cover shows the band—Hayward, Williams, and multi-instrumentalist Charles Bullen—dressed in ties and jackets bought at thrift stores, with short, neat haircuts and stern frowns. "The music bred a sort of pride," says Hayward. "Our look was related to the idea of pulling yourself together, so that you could fight back against these bastards who were ruining the world."

Deceit was released on Rough Trade in 1981, when the label was at the height of its power and influence, the vortex of London's postpunk vanguard. The label's roster included a hefty proportion of the city's most adventurous bands—Scritti, the Raincoats, This Heat, Essential Logic, the Red Crayola—along with non-London luminaries like Young Marble Giants, Cabaret Voltaire, Swell Maps, Kleenex, and many more. With a couple of exceptions, all of the above were featured on an epoch-defining compilation designed to introduce the Rough Trade groups to the U.S. market, *Wanna Buy a Bridge?* Released in 1980, *Bridge* is typically described as a life-changing experience by those Americans who bought it.

Rough Trade musicians frequently worked on each other's projects, a cooperative ethos fostered by label head Geoff Travis. Charles Hayward drummed on the Raincoats' off-kilter classic *Odyshape*, while Mayo Thompson's the Red Crayola evolved into a Rough Trade supergroup featuring Swell Maps' Epic Soundtracks, Essential Logic's Lora Logic, and the Raincoats' bassist Gina Birch.

Birch had migrated from Nottingham to attend Hornsey College of Art, arriving in London just in time to get swept up in punk's "wild, unfocused energy." The initial trigger for the Raincoats was seeing the Slits. "I was absolutely sick and jealous," recalls Birch. "But it was that

sort of motivating jealousy, 'I would love to have done that.'" She formed the Raincoats with Ana da Silva, a poetic Portuguese woman who, at twenty-seven, was eight years older than Birch and had a doctorate in languages and a thesis on Bob Dylan under her belt. They eventually settled on an all-girl lineup with Palmolive (recently departed from the Slits) on drums, and a classically trained violinist named Vicky Aspinall, previously a member of a feminist all-women musical collective called Jam Today.

"Being a woman is both feeling female, expressing female, and also (for the time being at least) reacting against what a woman is told she 'should' be like," wrote Ana da Silva in a Rough Trade booklet on the Raincoats. "This contradiction creates chaos in our lives and if we want to be real, we have to neglect what has been imposed on us, we have to create our lives in a new way. It is important to try and avoid as much as possible playing the games constantly proposed to you." The Raincoats' way of bypassing the pressure to be feminine was to look ordinary, adopting a scruffiness that would have been unremarkable in an all-male band during this era. Coming from women, though, it took on the quality of a radical gesture, a strident refusal of glamour. "We were quite shy, really," Birch said. Raincoats shows were less performances than "like watching a process, which the audience kind of felt they were privileged to kind of spy in on." Kurt Cobain, a passionate fan, used the same eavesdropping metaphor in his liner notes for a Raincoats reissue. Listening to the records, he wrote, felt like "we're together in the same old house and I have to be completely still or they will hear me spying from above and, if I get caught—everything will be ruined because it's their thing."

Although feminism was pervasive in universities, art colleges, and squatland, the music industry was still in the dark ages when it came to awareness about sexism. Advertisements commonly used chauvinist copy or imagery suggestive of rape scenarios. In this context, the postpunk groups' obsession with "ideological soundness" had moral force. The Raincoats "Off Duty Trip," for instance, concerned a notorious rape trial of the day, in which the perpetrator was treated leniently by a judge to avoid damaging his military career. But most Raincoats songs were more oblique explorations of the personal-is-political zone. And their rambunctious, near shambles of folk-tinged punk was far from dour or didactic. "We rehearsed for hours. You probably couldn't find a band that rehearsed more than we did, but we always fell apart," says Birch. "We always pushed ourselves a little bit beyond where we were capable of going." Unlike many punk-inspired musicians who embraced the anyone-can-do-it idea of nontechnique but were actually pretty skilled players, the Raincoats really did learn to play in public.

After the gloriously ragged debut *The Raincoats*, a whole world of exotic influences seeped into the group's music, from ethnic field recordings to Ornette Coleman and Miles Davis. The band started to pick up "odd instruments from junk shops and markets," says Birch, "like the balophone, this Mali instrument that's got gourds underneath it and beautiful bits of wood and misshapen holes." The result of all these nonrock inputs—*Odyshape*, the Raincoats' second album—is postpunk that's been totally unrocked. "My basslines started to get more and more sprawling and all over the place," says Birch. The Raincoats' rhythms had always been loosely tethered. Palmolive had "lots of tiny little toms, so it was always quite tribal. She wasn't so much driving the music as we were all clattering along together." By *Odyshape*, though, Palmolive had quit and many of the songs were written without a drummer in mind. Percussion parts were added afterward courtesy of a series of guest drummers, including Robert Wyatt (who'd been coaxed out of retirement to record a brilliant series of politically charged singles for Rough Trade). "Only Loved at Night" is like a gamelan music box, the different patterns interlocking like intricate cogs. On this song, as with much of *Odyshape*, the group swapped instrumental roles (a common postpunk ruse to keep things fresh), with Aspinall playing bass and Birch contributing drony guitar while da Silva produces wistful chimes from her kalimba, an African thumb piano. Charles Hayward's clockwork percussion on the track, added after the fact, is decorative, just one of many parallel pulses.

All through this period Birch was moonlighting in the Red Crayola, having developed a rapport with Mayo Thompson, who had coproduced the first Raincoats album. "From my point of view, the stuff we did in the Red Crayola was a continuation of what I was doing in the Raincoats, take something quite normal and twist it out of alignment," says Birch. The original Red Krayola (spelled with a K in the United States to avoid trademark infringement) emerged out of the same midsixties Texas psychedelic scene as Thirteenth Floor Elevators. Krayola simultaneously partook of the era's freak-out spirit while going slightly against the grain of the times. This "dissident among the dissidents" stance became Mayo Thompson's signature. He imbued the group with a certain dry conceptualism that was at odds with late-sixties let-it-all-hang-out mysticism. The group's second album, *Coconut Hotel*, recorded in 1967 and rejected by their original record company for being too experimental, featured songs with titles like "Vocal," "Free Guitar," and "Piano."

In the early seventies, Thompson moved to New York. He fell in with Art and Language, attracted by the sheer combative nature of their stance—"They were looking for trouble, and I've always been looking for trouble"—and made an album with A and L, *Corrected*

Slogans. He then moved to England in time for punk—just the sort of “action and edge” he craved. In the U.K., Thompson befriended Pere Ubu and in 1979 used them as his backing band to record a new Red Crayola album, *Soldier-Talk*. Meanwhile, he was becoming an increasingly pivotal figure in the Rough Trade collective, producing or coproducing (with Geoff Travis) many of the best postpunk bands of the era and taking on the role of public spokesperson for the label. As an in-house ideologue, he often collided with Green, a rival theory-guru figure in the Rough Trade milieu. Unlike the tortured Green, though, Thompson found a certain bone-dry humor in the grotesque ironies of capitalist reality. Explaining his penchant for fractured musical structures, he observed, “I didn’t fragment the world—I just happened to notice that it is fragmented.” Released on Rough Trade in 1981, the Red Crayola’s *Kangaroo?* featured lyrics from Art and Language that addressed various “monstrosities” generated by the internal contradictions of bourgeois culture.

Simultaneous with the revived Red Crayola, Thompson started playing guitar in Pere Ubu (who by then had abandoned the major-label sector and signed to Rough Trade). Some commentators blamed Thompson for the whimsical, unrock direction Pere Ubu pursued at Rough Trade, but that process was already under way before he joined. Influenced by his Jehovah’s Witness background, David Thomas suddenly decided that rock ‘n’ roll was reprobate music that stirred up selfish passions. By 1980’s *The Art of Walking*, the first Ubu album for Rough Trade, the group had jettisoned not just heavy riffs but dread, decay, and all the other signifiers of “industrial” in favor of bucolic imagery, ecologically motivated anthropomorphism, and songs about fish and dinosaurs. “The birds are saying what I want to say,” trilled Thomas on one song, while “Go” counseled attentiveness to “the small things that give pleasure.”

Despite this disconcerting shift, Ubu remained one of Rough Trade’s biggest bands, but the jewel in their roster, both sonically and commercially, was Young Marble Giants, a trio from Wales who, like Ubu, went in for a kind of postrock pastoralism, but did it much better. The group’s debut (and only) album, *Colossal Youth*, became one of Rough Trade’s biggest-selling records of the postpunk period. Young Marble Giants’ music exuded a spare stillness that felt wondrously fresh in 1980. Conceived as a revolt against punk by founder and primary songwriter Stuart Moxham, Young Marble Giants’ sound was partially inspired by the soft mood music of light classical and easy listening, fairground music, and “cheesy organ sounds” such as the Wurlitzers at the old movie palaces. Moxham developed a dry, choppy, suppressed-sounding style of rhythm guitar using an ultra-treble Rickenbacker and a technique called “muting”

(resting his strumming hand on the strings to damp the vibrations), which resulted in a peculiar mélange of Duane Eddy's twangy tremolo riffs and Steve Cropper's crisp rhythm guitar. His brother Phil's bass—high, melodic, often mistaken for another guitar—was a beetling, scurrying presence. Moxham describes the interplay between the two instruments as “almost like knitting,” a strikingly unmanly metaphor that beautifully captures the quiet radicalism of YMG's music. The rhythms, generated from a rudimentary drum machine, were played live on a crappy-sounding mono cassette player. Augmenting this sparse sonic palette were occasional keyboards and subliminal wisps of weirdness produced using a ring modulator or devices cobbled together by a tech-whiz cousin of the Moxhams.

But what really made Young Marble Giants special was the low-key, almost spoken singing of Alison Statton. She was Phil's girlfriend, and in truth Stuart never really wanted her to join the band. Indeed, when *NME* readers voted her the eighth-best singer of 1980, Stuart spluttered, “But Alison's not a singer! She's someone who sings. Alison sings as if she was at the bus stop or something. A real singer sings with more control.” Inadvertently, he captured precisely what was so perfect about Statton's undemonstrative vocals: a seductive ordinariness, a cool pallor of tone. Her image—print dresses, white tennis shoes, ankle socks—also fit the music's aura of fresh-faced provincial naïveté.

Young Marble Giants felt like music by introverts, for introverts. Moxham recalls seeking to create a sound “like a radio that's between stations, listening to it under the bedclothes at four A.M.... these fantastic short-wave sounds and snatches of modulated sounds.” Without knowing it, a lot of people had been waiting for a sound as subdued and insidious as this. YMG were practically adopted by the Rough Trade family. Moxham likens Geoff Travis to a father figure and describes the Raincoats as “feisty aunties who took us under their wing. On one level, they were kind of frighteningly feminist in a way that was new to us—they didn't shave their legs, for instance—but on the other they were very kind to us.” YMG's un-rock 'n' roll behavior (they often brought their dog with them to gigs) fit perfectly with the Rough Trade style.

Sadly, internal tensions split the band only ten months after the March 1980 release of *Colossal Youth*. In between, they also released the *Final Day* EP. Its title track is perhaps their best, and is certainly YMG's best-known song, thanks in large part to its receiving heavy rotation on John Peel's ten o'clock show on Radio One. “That song just came out perfectly formed,” says Moxham. “It took as long to write as it does to listen to.” To get the single-note whine that runs through the whole track and evokes what Moxham calls “the low-level

dread” of living with the possibility of nuclear annihilation, he stuck a matchstick in one of the organ keys. But what’s most chilling about “Final Day” is its brevity (just one minute and thirty-nine seconds) and Statton’s fatalistic tone as she sings, “When the light goes out on the final day/We will all be gone having had our say.”

In the early seventies, John Peel was the BBC’s resident hippie DJ, playing a mix of folk rock, prog, reggae, and cult weirdness. But he was quick to embrace punk and by 1979 had become a massively important figure for the postpunk do-it-yourself culture. “If you knew that one of your favorite bands was doing a Peel session, that was as important as going to one of their gigs,” says *Jamming’s* Tony Fletcher. “If you had to be out for some reason, you’d get one of your mates to tape it.” Records that Peel discovered would sometimes trickle down into other Radio One DJs’ shows, resulting in some unlikely U.K. chart hits. Downtown New York performance artist Laurie Anderson reached number two in the winter of 1981 with “O Superman,” an eerie, eight-minute piece based largely around her electronically processed vocals, while the Pop Group offshoot Pigbag made number three in the spring of 1982 with “Papa’s Got a Brand New Pigbag.”

Peel’s support of the marginal and maverick was all the more crucial because Radio One, before deregulation of the airwaves, enjoyed a near monopoly over pop music in the U.K. Yet paradoxically it was precisely this centralized, nationwide nature of British radio that created the possibility of real cultural decentralization. Peel received strange self-released records from every corner of the country and was not only conscientious about sifting through them, but an ardent regionalist inclined to give provincial groups preferential treatment. If Peel liked your record, you were instantly granted a national audience. “You’d get records sent in by these stropky lads from tiny towns in Lincolnshire, places you had to look up on the map,” Peel said a couple of years before his death. “And I’m a great sucker for cheerful amateurism. Another thing I liked was that a lot of these bands were almost entirely without ambition. Their goal was often just to put out a single, or do one session with us.” Sometimes a session recorded at the BBC specially for Peel’s show actually became a single, as happened with Scritti’s *Peel Sessions* EP. That was also the case for the Prefects, irreverent cacophony makers from Birmingham, whose anthem, “Going Through the Motions,” took the piss out of professionalized-to-living-death rock bands, and whose material ranged from the twelve-minute dirge “Bristol Road Leads to Dachau” to an eight-second cover of Queen’s “Bohemian Rhapsody.”

“John Peel band” practically became a genre of music during the period from 1979 to 1981. All kinds of eccentrics with four-track tape recorders in their bedrooms sent off singles and, if the track caught

Peel's ear, they'd enjoy a brief reign of glory on the national airwaves. One classic example is "There Goes Concorde Again" by (And The) Native Hipsters. The brainchild of two Wimbledon School of Art graduates, William Wilding and Nanette Greenblatt, this 1980 single blended cloying whimsy with genuine psychedelic strangeness. Buoyed by keyboards that capered like tipsy aliens, Greenblatt played the loopy housewife peering through net curtains and cooing, "Oooooooh, *look*—there goes Concorde again!" Peel recalled, "That was one of those records, where you put it on and thought, 'This will be fantastically irritating in a fortnight, but until then let's play it to death.'" Also on the wacky side, Notsensibles' "I'm in Love with Margaret Thatcher" tapped into that often downplayed side of postpunk based in not taking *anything* seriously. "Postpunk's thought of as something rather po-faced and somber," recalled Peel. "But a lot of it was *funny*. We used to go to gigs and laugh like a drain."

Not that the Peel show was nonstop silliness. Another late-night hit in 1979 was Fatal Microbes' "Violence Grows," on which the baleful tones of fifteen-year-old punk starlet Honey Bane survey London's frayed social fabric during what proved to be a banner year for street violence. Noting how bus conductors had learned to keep their mouths shut when thugs refused to pay, Bane taunts the listener, "While you're getting kicked to death in a London pedestrian subway/Don't think passersby will help, they'll just look the other way." Slowdrone guitar midway between the Doors' "The End" and the Velvet Underground's "Venus in Furs" swirls ominously behind her. Family Fodder managed to fuse scary and silly on "Playing Golf (with My Flesh Crawling)," a macabre yet jaunty ditty sung from the point of view of a man who's in a state of arrested putrefaction ("There's times I feel fungus growing on me") and wishes he could get it over with and be dead.

On the furthest edges of the John Peel universe, the do-it-yourself principle proliferated in the form of the cassette underground. Groups who thought that vinyl was too costly or too careerist released their music in tape form instead, sometimes selling it for a nominal sum, sometimes giving it away for free if you mailed them a blank tape. There were hundreds of cassette bands across the U.K., typically with absurdist/puerile names like God and the Turds, the Night the Goldfish Died, Anthrax for the People, or the Scrotum Poles. There were even a handful of cassette-only labels, such as Smellytapes and Deleted Records. The absolute kingpin of this microscene, its Rough Trade, was Fuck Off Records.

Fuck Off was run by Kif Kif, formerly of the hippie band Here and Now. He had ended up playing noise punk in his own group, the 012, whose motto was "Bad music is soul music." Fuck Off's catalog

boasted over thirty cassettes. The label's star act was Danny and the Dressmakers, creators of such immortal classics as "Come on Baby Lite My Shite" and "Going Down the Sperm Bank Four Quid a Wank." But the label's strongest conceptual statement was releasing a cacophonous cassette by the Teen Vampires, much of which consisted of an argument between the singer and bassist. Kif described it as "the worst tape I've ever heard." But he felt compelled to release it "just because it was so awful." Whether anybody actually sent off for the cassette is irrelevant. The purity of the gesture—the do-it-yourself/messthetics principle taken to the limit—stands.

CABARET NOIR AND THEATER OF CRUELTY IN POSTPUNK SAN FRANCISCO

“SAN FRANCISCO’S the kook capital of the world,” Residents’ spokesman Jay Clem once observed about the city that has long rivaled New York as America’s bohemian capital, a sanctuary for artistic experiment and nonconformist living. “What this city means to me is the last stand on American ground,” Damon Edge of Chrome declared in 1979. “People who don’t fit in anywhere else come here.... There’s no place else to go in America.”

The 1950s Beat milieu of poets and writers that clustered around City Lights bookstore and the late-sixties scene of hippies and happenings focused around Haight Street and the Fillmore are both well documented. Far less attention has been paid to the third golden age of San Franciscan bohemia, based around punk rock, industrial culture, and art/music synergy in all their most outré manifestations in the late seventies and early eighties. Blaine L. Reininger, cofounder of the theatrical electronic cabaret ensemble Tuxedomoon, wrote of this era as “our own ‘Belle Epoque’.... San Francisco seemed to befull of geniuses then, and the scene which arose around places like the Mabuhay Gardens and the Deaf Club felt like Paris must have felt when people like Toulouse-Lautrec and Gauguin were meeting in the cafés in Montmartre. We felt possessed by some demon or god, and we went about our business in what I can only call a state of grace.”

Like New York, San Francisco in those days was a city in which it was possible to live on virtually nothing, which allowed artists to avoid full-time jobs and concentrate on their creative work. All over the city there were faded-looking Victorians, large houses that could be rented dirt cheap. “I had a fourteen-room Victorian for six hundred dollars a month which I shared with four other people,” says Tuxedomoon’s bassist Peter Principle. “You could get by because things were inexpensive and the community was supportive.”

When it came to the city’s actual rock scene, though, the years immediately prior to punk had the feel of an aftermath—washed-up hippies wandering around wondering, What the fuck *happened*, man? Live music almost disappeared as disco took over, with rock clubs getting converted into discotheques, where only records were played (disco acts rarely performed live). “If you were in a band at that time, the only way you could get work was by playing other people’s songs,” says Joseph Jacobs, bassist of Factrix, San Francisco’s premier industrial band.

When punk arrived, San Francisco was one of the first cities in America to embrace it. The scene centered around a handful of

hangouts, including Café Flor, the Deaf Club, the Mabuhay, and Temple Beautiful. Flor was the nerve center for all kinds of artists, musicians, and performers. Located in the sleazy Mission District, the Deaf Club was “an authentic club for the deaf where you ordered beer in sign language and where presumably the patrons didn’t mind the music because they couldn’t hear it,” says Tuxedomoon’s Steve Brown. “I guess they liked the vibrating floorboards!” Surrounded by strip clubs, the Filipino restaurant Mabuhay hosted punk-rock gigs every night, while Temple Beautiful was an abandoned synagogue next door to cult leader Jim Jones’s temple. “They’d put a generator outside Temple Beautiful and just wire the electricity in for the night of the show,” recalls Principle.

The San Francisco scene was a hospitable environment for experimental outfits, many of who, though they might have been initially inspired by punk’s confrontational attitude, quickly moved into more expansive or esoteric musical terrain than the more orthodox local punks such as the Avengers and the Dead Kennedys. If San Francisco became America’s number two postpunk city after New York, in large part this was because local audiences had a high tolerance for pretentiousness. “Sure, there was a lot of bad performance art, but that’s okay, better that it was allowed,” says Factrix guitarist Bond Bergland. “And San Francisco people were *very* allowing!” The city became home to a scene that, even more than No Wave Manhattan, explored the possibilities of mixed-media spectacle, a tendency shaped partly by the living legacy of the city’s gay radical theater groups (such as the Angels of Light) and partly by the “total art” ideas emanating from the city’s Art Institute.

Steve Brown, for instance, came out of sixties underground theater. Blaine L. Reininger had been exploring the idea of fusing music, writing, and theater into “unified field art” since the late sixties. Factrix, meanwhile, weren’t so much art damaged as Artaud damaged. “We were trying to bring the Theatre of Cruelty to the rock stage,” says Bergland. “It was really about confrontation, pushing people over the edge, something you’d seen at full steam with the Living Theater in the 1960s. The hippie thing was culturally played down during punk, but it was still the clear revolutionary predecessor.” This postsixties radical-theater sensibility was shared by Factrix’s contemporaries and collaborators, extreme performance artists such as Monte Cazazza and Joanna Went. Mark Pauline staged auto-destructive spectacles involving robots under the name Survival Research Laboratories, while Z’ev, a late-sixties veteran, earned renown for his ritualistic performances involving metal-bashing percussion.

Cinema was massively influential, too. Repertory theaters such as

the Strand and the Embassy played a mix of classic movies, obscure foreign films, and cheap horror flicks. Inspired by Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, Factrix talked of wanting to take "a razor to the mind's eye." Says Bergland, "Everybody in San Francisco during that period was heavily inspired by film." The Residents, the weirdest Bay Area band of the entire era, actually tried to make their own modern surrealist movie, *Vileness Fats*. It was intended to be the world's first fourteen-hour musical/comedy/romance set in a world of one-armed midgets, but eventually had to be abandoned. The Residents had more success with shorter films, producing a series of pioneering promo videos around specific songs. Their live performances had a theatrical bent as well, involving elaborate stage sets and costumes, including the famous giant masks that transformed each Resident's head into a monstrous eyeball.

In 1978, when the Residents first started to become widely known, they were often mentioned in the same breath as Pere Ubu and Devo, partly because of a shared vibe of quirked-out grotesquerie, and partly because both Devo and the Residents released sacrilegious covers of the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" as singles within a few months of each other. In the aftermath of punk, freaks such as the Residents reached an audience they'd otherwise never have found. But the group had actually been around for nearly a decade before punk. Originally from Louisiana, they migrated to California in the late sixties hoping to catch the high tide of psychedelia but arriving only in time to witness its ebbing. "The Residents sprang...from the fact that Psychedelia dead-ended," declared Hardy Fox of Cryptic Corporation, the organization that looked after the Residents' affairs. "The people who were doing experiments in that direction stopped when they had barely scratched the surface."

The Residents wanted to take psychedelia further. Being nonmusicians, they felt, was the only way to guarantee truly free creativity. "Before they started doing the Residents, they had never played," Homer Flynn of Cryptic Corporation has said. "By teaching themselves, they felt it was a good path towards originality." Their music's wonderfully angular melodies and jerky rhythms seemed unprecedented, but the Residents *did* have musical influences. They were just unrecognizable simply because, as Flynn pointed out, "the Residents weren't *capable* of rendering them that faithfully."

Perhaps that's why Warner Brothers rejected them. In 1971 the group, then nameless, sent off demo tapes to the label's Harve Halverstadt, who'd worked with their hero Captain Beefheart. Because they'd provided only a return address, the tapes were sent back addressed to "Residents, 20 Sycamore St., San Francisco." Now christened with a name but lacking an outlet for their music, the

Residents set up their own independent label, Ralph Records. The Residents' do-it-yourself impulse went much further than even Rough Trade's. Their goal was complete cultural autonomy. Their warehouse headquarters on San Francisco's Grove Street contained a recording studio, offices for Cryptic Corporation and Ralph Records, a darkroom, a graphics studio for designing their own record sleeves, and a huge soundstage for making films and videos.

A couple of years before Public Image Ltd, the Residents trailblazed the pop-group-as-corporation stance, but with a twist: The group itself remained completely anonymous and faceless, and dealings with the outside world were mediated via the Cryptic Corporation. As a result, the question "Who *are* the Residents?" stirred much speculation. One persistent rumor maintained that the Residents were actually the postbreakup Beatles rejoining in secret for neo-Dada mischief making. This probably stems from the fact that early on the group toyed with calling themselves the New Beatles, while the cover of their 1973 debut, *Meet the Residents*, was modeled on *Meet the Beatles*, but with the portraits of the Fab Four grotesquely defaced. To the Residents, the Beatles symbolized everything good *and* everything bad about pop, the mind-expanding potential of studio-based psychedelia versus pop's tyrannical, mind-controlling ubiquity (Lennon's "We're bigger than Jesus"). In 1976 the Residents released *The Third Reich 'n' Roll*, a darkly comic satire of pop as totalitarianism. *American Bandstand* host Dick Clark was depicted on the front cover dressed as Hitler. Inside, the side-long "Swastikas on Parade" offered a medley of defiled sixties pop hits overlaid with World War II sound effects of air raid sirens and dive-bombing Stukas. All these conflicted feelings about pop, the sixties, and the Beatles came together on the Residents' 1977 single "Beyond the Valley of a Day in the Life," which featured "samples" of the Fab Four's wilder moments woven into an eerie audio collage. At various points you hear Lennon singing "don't believe in Beatles" (from his first solo album) and issuing a wan apology to their global audience ("Please everybody, if we haven't done what we could have done, we've tried").

After a flurry of releases in 1977 and 1978, Cryptic Corporation announced the imminent release of the band's grand masterwork. A sonic recreation of the world of Inuit Eskimo tribes, *Eskimo* would also serve as a tribute-cum-elegy to the Inuit's vanishing folkways—you know, slaughtering superfluous newborn girls, putting the old folks out to die of hypothermia, that sort of thing. After six weeks of small ads in the music press that steadily whipped up intrigue, Cryptic Corporation abruptly announced the record's suspension from the Ralph release schedule, because the Residents had gone AWOL and run off with the master tapes.

In a separate statement, the Residents declared they'd split from Cryptic Corporation and would never let "those bloodsuckers" have *Eskimo*. Their managers retorted with the claim that the group had gone mad from being "cooped up" in the studio for too long making the album. "Towards the end they were already being difficult and acting oddly—working all night and communicating only with strange cries when we, the Cryptic officers, were around," Jay Clem claimed. "Then they locked us out altogether when they were working, and when I tried to reason with them they filled the reception area...with wicker baskets full of ice and sometimes fish from the bay wharf." This whole falling-out between Cryptic Corporation and the Residents was, of course, totally staged, a miniature masterpiece of disinformation and hype. Although to this day the pretense is studiously maintained that Cryptic Corporation and the Residents are separate entities, at some point the truth seeped out. The Residents and their "representatives" were in fact one and the same.

When the "rift" was healed and *Eskimo* finally got released in the autumn of 1979, the record was deservedly hailed as a masterpiece, and it sold over a hundred thousand copies worldwide, a staggering achievement for a record so unsettling. Evoking the alien experiences of life on the polar ice cap—walrus hunts conducted in disorienting white-out conditions, "Arctic hysteria" induced by the sensory deprivation of the long winter darkness—*Eskimo* seemed to make the temperature in your room plummet.

The Residents then swerved from *Eskimo*'s listener-challenging experimentalism to the surprising accessibility of 1980's *The Commercial Album*. It wasn't called that because of any crossover ambitions but because each piece was only one minute long, closer to the duration of a TV commercial than a pop song. The Residents' rationale for this condensed approach was persuasive. Given that most pop songs contain a verse and chorus repeated three times within three minutes, trimming the length down to sixty seconds automatically jettisons a substantial amount of sheer redundancy. *The Commercial Album* distills the quintessence of exquisite weirdness and macabre whimsy that is the Residents music into forty jingles as intricate and succinct as Japanese calligraphy.

Ralph's other great release of 1980 was Tuxedomoon's debut album, *Half-Mute*, a lost masterpiece of synthpop noir. Tuxedomoon began as an offshoot of the Angels of Light, "a 'family' of dedicated artists who sang, danced, painted, and sewed for the Free Theatre," says singer/multi-instrumentalist Steve Brown. "I was lucky to be part of the Angels. I fell for a bearded transvestite in the show and moved in with him at the Angels' commune. Gay or bi men and women who were themselves works of art, extravagant in dress and behavior,

disciples of Artaud and Wilde and Julian Beck [of the Living Theater] ...we lived together in a big Victorian house...pooled all our disability checks each month, ate communally...and used the rest of the funds to produce lavish theatrical productions—never charging a dime to the public. *This* is what theater was meant to be, a Dionysian rite of lights and music and chaos and eros.”

Despite these sixties roots, Tuxedomoon’s music looked toward the electronic eighties. Blaine L. Reininger and Brown originally met after enrolling in an electronic-music class at San Francisco’s City College, where each was blown away by the other’s end-of-semester performance. “Blaine’s effort was a full-blown ‘total art’ spectacle,” says Brown. “He sang and danced in a white smock, with a balloon headdress, backdropped by projected Super 8 films.” For his own piece, Brown set up a tape loop system as diagrammed on the back of Brian Eno’s *Discreet Music*, into which he played washes of string sounds using a Polymoog synth.

To help him with this school project, Brown had called on the technical skill of fellow Angel of Light member Tommy Tadlock. The great lost catalyst figure of San Francisco postpunk, Tadlock became Tuxe-domoon’s mentor/guru/technician/manager and later worked with Factrix, too, building bizarre sound-generating gizmos. When Reininger and Brown joined forces, they started rehearsing at Tadlock’s Upper Market Street house. “There, we all cranked out our weirdness together into something called Tuxedomoon,” recalls Brown. Tadlock played a crucial role as an “audio systems designer.” Blaine “played both electronic violin and guitar onstage, and Tommy designed ‘Treatment Mountain’ for him—a plywood pyramid displaying junction boxes or compressors or effects he had designed and built as well as an Echoplex.”

Tuxedomoon developed a style based partly on whatever instruments were handy (Reininger’s violin, Brown’s saxophone, Tadlock’s Polymoog synth) and partly on prohibitions. “The only rule was the tacit understanding that anything that sounded like anyone else was taboo,” says Brown. They were just starting when punk arrived, and although hearing “God Save the Queen” initially encouraged them, Tuxedomoon soon felt that punk had “ossified into a puritan dogma of guitars, bass, and drums and screaming vocalist,” says Brown. “When Blaine and I first started performing in public—a violin, a sax, a synth and a tape recorder—the crowd threw beer bottles and screamed, ‘Where’s the drummer?!’”

Gradually, Tuxedomoon expanded, not by taking on a drummer, but recruiting underground radio activist Peter Principle as bassist and incorporating performance artist Winston Tong and projections from filmmaker Bruce Geduldig into their live shows. Principle recalls an

unstoppable flow of creativity: “Every three or four weeks we’d have a gig booked and say, ‘Let’s write a whole new show.’” The concerts grew ever more multileveled and visually arresting. “I can think of shows we did using tapes, live instruments, professional painted sets hanging onstage, a female chorus, Bruce’s film projections,” marvels Brown. Tong’s contribution would often take the uncanny form of dolls manipulated so that they appeared to be magically alive.

Around 1980, a lot of people had started talking up cabaret as an alternative model to the rock gig. Organizations like Cabaret Futura in London, groups like Kid Creole and the Coconuts, even synthpop idol Gary Numan, all looked back to prerock ideas of showbiz, while simultaneously glancing sideways to performance art and multimedia. Entertainment that was costumed, scripted, and choreographed, that didn’t hide its artifice but *reveled* in it, began to seem more honest than rock’s faux spontaneity. Tuxedomoon arrived at just the right moment to tap into this shift. “Other San Francisco performers like Joanna Went used props and audience interaction, but in a shock-oriented way, whereas we had a feeling for the cabaret thing,” says Principle. “That’s why we did wear tuxedos in punk-rock clubs like the Mabuhay, like it was a dinner theater. And we had this concept of ‘loungezak’—Muzak made for existentially angsted New Wave people.”

Tuxedomoon even called their publishing company Angst Music. On songs such as “What Use?” and “7 Years,” cold electronics, shudders of violin, and lugubrious saxophone conjured an atmosphere of languid melancholy. From the *Scream with a View* EP to the second album, *Desire*, themes of anomie and modernity recurred. “Holiday for Plywood,” for instance, is about consumer paranoia and dream-home heartache: “You daren’t sit on the sofa/The plastic makes you sweat/The bathroom’s done in mirror tiles/The toaster wants your blood.”

Tuxedomoon’s aura of jaded elegance always seemed somehow European, and it was overseas that the group had their greatest impact. On the rare occasions that the group ventured into Middle America, they didn’t exactly get a warm reception. “In the American music scene at that time there was an attitude about authenticity,” says Principle. “Programmed rhythm was a foreign concept in America back then, and there was a lot of hostility toward drum machines.”

“TUXEDOMOON WERE KIND OF MENTORS to us,” says Joseph Jacobs of Factrix. “Not musically, but in the sense of, ‘You can actually do this—be in a band with no drummer and have audiences.’ When we started Factrix, we didn’t even talk about having a

drummer. We knew we wanted to do something different, so we removed one of the key components of rhythm and blues.”

Excited by PiL's and Throbbing Gristle's adventures in sonic mutation, Factrix built their own modified instruments (“glaxobass,” “radioguitar,” “amputated bass”) with Tommy Tadlock's assistance. They also experimented with bizarre protosynths called Optigans that Tadlock had acquired. “‘Optigan’ stood for optical organ,” says Bond Bergland. “They were instruments for the family to play songs on, with the songs stored on these clear plastic acetates, which the Optigan read through some kind of light-reading device.” Factrix quickly realized that “you could put the acetates in upside down and backward, play them the wrong way. That was what was really inspiring to us at the time, ‘Let's see what happens if we do this *wrong*.’”

Factrix tried anything and everything that wasn't standard rock instrumentation—whistling tea kettles, an inexpensive early sequencer called the Mutron—“but really the main instrument was Joseph's tape recorder,” says Bergland. Along with technology, Factrix were equally interested in premodern and non-Western sounds, ethnic instruments like the *doumbek* and *saz*. “Even the drum machine rhythms were trying to mimic African drumming in a very loose way, inspired by field recordings,” Bergland explains. “This was years before ‘world music’ existed. My thinking was, ‘If something sticks around for thousands of years, it probably has some meaning, something real about it.’” In this fascination for ecstatic ritual music, Factrix were a couple of steps ahead of Throbbing Gristle.

With its picturesque hills and quaint cable cars, its foggy bay and idyllic Golden Gate Park, San Francisco doesn't immediately seem like an “industrial” city. Yet the downtown area south of Market Street was full of inexpensive lofts formerly used for light manufacturing, and the “industrial element” of repurposing these spaces for artistic activity was “a big part of San Francisco culture,” says Jacobs. San Francisco ranked alongside Sheffield and London as a bastion of industrial music, too. Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle performed to huge crowds in San Francisco. TG even played their last gig at Kezar Pavilion in 1981.

The city was home to the unofficial fifth member of TG, Monte Cazazza, a performance artist and renegade researcher of all things aberrant and unwholesome. He describes himself as an “outcast historian, a cultural mortician.” Cazazza, Factrix, and Mark Pauline from Survival Research Laboratories formed “a little scene,” according to Bergland. Together they staged a series of mixed-media extravaganzas that left audiences reeling. Instead of playing punk clubs like Mabuhay, Bergland says, “we wanted to make spectacles so

people were aware this was an unusual event. The first one we did together was at the Kezar Pavilion. Monte made a big stainless-steel swastika spinning on an axis, handcuffed himself to it, and hung upside down.”

Mark Pauline wasn’t a musician but a sort of crackpot inventor who staged apocalyptic battles between robots he’d constructed. An alumnus of Eckerd College in Florida alongside DNA’s Arto Lindsay and Mars’ Mark Cunningham, Pauline participated in San Francisco’s first Punk Art Show in 1978 and made his debut solo performance with *Machine Sex* the following year. “When Survival Research Laboratories threw an event, it really was a spectacle,” says Jacobs. “It was like seeing a live movie. There was always this edgy element of danger because these machines were crude. Things would explode when they shouldn’t, or wouldn’t explode when they should!”

The most infamous multimedia shockfest staged by SRL, Cazazza, and Factrix—June 1981’s *Night of the Succubus*—involved Pauline making artificially animated animal corpses like the “rabot,” fashioned from metal, electrical wire, and rotting bunny. “We got all these meat parts and sewed them onto this robot,” Pauline recalled. “We used pig feet, pig hide, and a cow’s head and bolted it onto this little feller. It had a motor on it, and when you turned the motor on, it would just vibrate and shake like he was sick, like he maybe had a fever.” Christened Piggly Wiggly, the grotesque chimera could also turn its head and move its arms. “The last song of the night, we did a twenty-minute version of ‘Helter Skelter’ from *The White Album*, and it sounded like the soundtrack to World War Three,” recalls Bergland. “Mark had made these air guns out of eight-foot pipes, and he’d taken all these eighteen-inch steel bolts and sharpened them to a razor point. And they were shooting these darts at incredible velocity over the heads of the audience into Piggly Wiggly, who was being pulled over the audience’s head on a tether. After Piggly was full of darts, Joseph drilled out all his teeth, so the whole place was filled with cow-teeth dust. A few people got freaked out. For us it was just superdeep, darkest black humor.”

Factrix were engrossed by all things morbid and extreme. But there was also an otherworldly impulse in their music, a psychedelic yearning to jettison language and escape time, to “scramble thought patterns, break up the syntax,” as singer and lyricist Cole Palme put it. Bergland’s guitar was blatantly trippy, billowing up in gaseous arabesques that placed him in the tradition of West Coast acid rock and *kosmische* Krautrockers like Manuel Göttsching. “I don’t so much recall that we were tripping when we were making the music so much as we were tripping when we were performing,” chuckles Jacobs. Friends who “wanted to ensure an interesting musical experience for

themselves” would ply the band with magic mushrooms. “Drugs weren’t really informing our sonic experiments on a daily basis, though,” says Bergland, citing both poverty and “a strong work ethic” as reasons. “The mystical part of Factrix was the same as Coltrane or any musician who’s trying to get to the place where the music is free. The sounds, they really did have a life of their own. We were really just following the sounds. We were disciples of feedback.”

“Disciples of feedback” would also be a good description of the band Chrome, who were tagged “industrial” but really were much closer to Throbbing Gristle’s original self-description as “post-psychedelic trash.” The band’s musical genius, Helios Creed—an LSD-gobbling Hendrix fiend who’d migrated from his native Hawaii to San Francisco just a little too late for psychedelia’s golden age—developed a guitar sound that was “acid” in both the corrosive and hallucinogenic senses of the word. It also sounded metallic, not in the sense of the heavy-metal genre so much as in the way that it conjured visions of twisted and torn car flesh.

The band was actually started by Damon Edge, who graduated from CalArts in Los Angeles, where he’d studied with Allen Kaprow, best known for pioneering “happenings” in the sixties. While at CalArts, Edge also dabbled in avant-garde composition, conducting tape experiments and making what he called “not quite right music,” some of which ended up on porn movie soundtracks. Chrome’s debut, *The Visitation*, was recorded in 1976, before Creed joined the band, and sounded like a belated West Coast trip band somewhere in the vicinity of Santana and Hot Tuna. When Creed arrived in 1977 to add his harshly treated guitar to Edge’s synth and science-fiction lyrics, Chrome made a quantum leap. They went from psychedelic Johnny-come-latelies to “making music for 1995,” as Edge put it.

A turning point in this process came when Creed heard *Never Mind the Bollocks* for the first time at Edge’s house. “I didn’t know what to think at first, but the more we listened to it, the more we got behind it. So we decided, ‘Wow, let’s be a *punk* band. Let’s cut our hair!’ Then Damon played me these whacked-out tape loops he’d made in art school and I was like, ‘Man, this is the best shit you’ve done. Let’s mix our punk shit with your weird acid shit. And let’s call ourselves ‘acid punk.’”

In punk DIY style, Chrome released their own records, but only out of necessity. After being rejected by local indie label Beserkley, Edge borrowed money from his wealthy parents and started his own label, Siren, in order to release 1978’s *Alien Soundtracks* (the first Chrome album with Creed). “All the early copies, the first three hundred or so, were pressed up by hand with a crank,” recalls Creed. “That was the cheapest way you could get records manufactured. And we glued the

covers together ourselves.” *Alien Soundtracks* and its 1979 sequel, *Half Machine Lip Lip Moves*, made Chrome cult figures, especially in Germany and the U.K.

Chrome called their sound “acid punk,” but “cyberpunk” would do just as nicely (indeed, one of the band members went by the name John L. Cyborg). It’s easy to imagine Chrome classics such as “Chromosome Damage,” “All Data Lost,” and “Abstract Nympho” as the cold-rush soundtrack for *Neuromancer*, the 1985 genre-defining cyberpunk novel by William Gibson, who a few years earlier actually wrote a short story entitled “Burning Chrome.” Edge and Creed were both science-fiction fanatics. But Creed says that the pair’s inspirations came more from movies than books, and leaned toward the space fantasy end of things, albeit with an apocalyptic slant. “When I was in Hawaii I saw a UFO hovering right over my head. That really influenced me. Me and Damon had all these theories about how you could be channeled by aliens. They could make music through you that wasn’t normal.”

Whether it was of extraterrestrial origin or not, Chrome’s music certainly sounded aberrant. “One of the first things people noticed was Chrome sounds like a paranoid acid trip,” says Creed. He explains that the punk edge to their reinvented acid rock came from grasping that “the reality of the psychedelic experience isn’t love and peace, it’s *insanity*. If you actually took LSD and listened to our records, the trip would get so whacked-out you’d start laughing. Funny-scary, we called it. The bad trip would turn into a good trip, because you’d already *been* to the most negative part of the universe.”

The group Flipper set their controls for precisely this pitch-black void at the core of the cosmos. Surfing the music’s tidal wave of rubble and dregs, singers Bruce Lose and Will Shatter delivered lines such as “Ever wish the human race didn’t exist?” and “Feel so empty feel so old/Just waiting to feel the death like cold” with a strange exuberance. Flipper stared into the abyss only to hock a lugie into it.

Of all San Francisco’s postpunk groups, Flipper were the most punk, to the point of almost belonging to the hardcore scene. But their music was a little too dirgy to fit comfortably with that movement’s “loud fast rules” dogma. Musically, they had more in common with Public Image Ltd’s abstraction than the Dead Kennedys’ anthems. PiL and Flipper both aimed for a kind of visceral vanguard music, radical but not rarefied or pretentious. “We want to experiment with the music without being an art band,” Will Shatter told punk zine *Maximumrocknroll*. Like PiL, Flipper loved disco and funkateers like Rick James. “Sex Bomb,” Flipper’s big crowd-pleaser, was steeped in funk. In Flipper, the juggernaut basslines (played alternately by Lose and Shatter) served as melody-riffs, freeing up the guitarist to shower

acid rain on the listener's head. Like Keith Levene, guitarist Ted Falconi rarely played riffs or distinct power chords, just churned up distorted drone tones and writhing whorls of feedback.

Flipper actually secured the main support slot at PiL's Bay Area show, a prestige gig given that Lydon's band were at their absolute zenith as postpunk icons in May 1980. "I saw Bruce Lose at the PiL press conference in San Francisco that May," says Joe Carducci, who coproduced the band's debut single. "When they threw it open to questions from the audience, Bruce kept yelling, 'What do you think of Flipper?' The question was ignored! Bruce was just pranking it, but he was obsessed with Johnny Rotten."

For all their sonic affinities with PiL, though, Flipper weren't nearly as precious about what they did as Lydon's lot. Their attitude is captured in the slogan "Flipper suffered for their art, now it's your turn," and in Falconi's immortal quip "Flipper doesn't want audiences with good taste, Flipper wants audiences that taste good." Live, Flipper managed to combine frat party riotousness and audience confrontation. Lose remembers an occasion shortly after the birth of his son when he lugged three weeks' worth of soiled diapers to a gig and pelted the audience. "The audience tended to throw them right back at the band. Our drummer, Steve DePace, got a dirty diaper in the face. The band thanked me a lot for that bright idea!"

"We tried to convey the irreverence and silliness Flipper projected onstage when we pulled together the live album *Public Flipper Limited*," says Steve Tupper, who released the group's records on his Frisco-based indie, Subterranean. Humor permeated even the most nihilistic Flipper songs such as "Nothing" and "Life Is Cheap." "It was kind of extremely optimistic and extremely bleak at the same time," says Tupper, pointing to the ambiguity of Will Shatter's line "Life is the only thing worth living for," which is delivered in a voice pitched exactly midway between cynical derision (at the sentiment's fatuity) and desperate belief.

Flipper may have evolved into a sort of National Lampoon version of PiL, but originally they were founded by Ricky Williams, the singer of the Sleepers, a band some people regard as America's own Joy Division. In his book *Rock and the Pop Narcotic*, Carducci described them as "what Joy Division might have developed into had they the balls." Today he waxes fondly about the Sleepers' "slow, minor-chord Gothic songs" and the "narcotic, spectral, jawdropping beauty" of guitarist Michael Belfer's playing. Vocalist Williams was a mentally volatile, dysfunctional character, though. He gave Flipper its name, which was inspired by his finding a shark-ravaged dolphin on the beach while tripping on acid. But soon the rest of Flipper—hardly models of stability themselves—kicked him out and replaced him with

Bruce Lose.

“In the early days, Flipper’s music was so abstract, a lot of people thought they were just improvising,” says Carducci. “Flipper’s the reason I bought a tape recorder. I taped all their early gigs because they were so evanescent at the start, you’d go, ‘Wow, that was a great gig but I can’t even remember any of it.’ And I don’t do any drugs!” This same impulse to document something vital but fleeting inspired Steve Tupper to found Subterranean. “There were all these bands in the San Francisco area and they weren’t getting recorded,” he recalls. “There was just one label really, 415, and they were doing New Wave pop stuff. The first Subterranean release was the *SF Underground* seven-inch EP with four different bands, including Flipper. The other three were all more conventional, straight-ahead punk. Flipper really stood out because they were totally different from anybody else in town.”

Tupper was an underground-culture veteran with a pedigree in late-sixties protest and community activism, including SDS campaigns against the Vietnam War, the Diggers, the People’s Park in Berkeley, organizing a 1970 citywide rent strike, and food co-ops. But he was never very involved in the musical side of the counterculture until punk took off in San Francisco. Tupper participated in New Youth—an “alternative nonprofit production company,” he says, designed to create places for bands to play that weren’t dependent on commercial club promoters—and helped to set up a local chapter of Rock Against Racism. Subterranean documented loads of local punk bands as well as San Francisco’s experimental fringe. Flipper, Factrix, Z’ev, and local synthpunk outfit Nervous Gender all appeared on *Live at Target*, a four-band live compilation that is the San Francisco counterpart to *No New York*.

Of all Subterranean’s groups, Flipper had the greatest impact. Released in 1981, *Generic* rocked like a wild party on the rim of the void, and 1984’s *Gone Fishin’* pushed Flipper’s bass-grinding dirgepunk into more experimental zones. Stark and hypnotic, “The Lights, the Sound, the Rhythm, the Noise” is a kissing cousin to Joy Division’s “Transmission,” while the celestial maelstrom of “You Nought Me” swirls with Sun Ra keyboards, multitracked vocals, and pitch-bent sounds, like a demonic kaleidoscope where all the colors are shades of black. “When we were making *Gone Fishin’*, one evening nobody showed up but me,” recalls Lose. “So I laid down a huge number of extra tracks of sounds—fifty vocal tracks, piano work, percussion, clavier, phasing effects. The next day, the guys flipped out and they were like, ‘We’ve got to take twenty-five of these voices out.’ But it was a lot of fun making that record.” By the closing track, “One by One,” Flipper sound like they’re smashing their way through the

planet's crust. "Will's beating up his bass and trying to sound like the low rumbling surf, Ted is playing the psalm of the ocean, Steve's drums are the waves crashing, and me, I'm singing the body of water," says Lose, misty-eyed and mystical.

By 1985, though, the pace of Flipper's hedonism was wearing the band down. Lose describes himself and Will Shatter as "polymorphic drug users, doing anything and everything." Within a few years of *Gone Fishin'*, Shatter died from a heroin overdose and Flipper disintegrated. "Drugs did most of the San Francisco bands in quickly," says Carducci. According to Helios Creed, drugs were also a factor in the breakup of Chrome. "Damon got introduced to heroin and I got introduced to speed. He became more introverted and agoraphobic, and I got the opposite. I was like, 'This ain't no good, I've got to put a band together and go tour.'"

San Francisco changed in the early eighties. The "belle epoque" Blaine L. Reininger wrote about began to fade. The dual assassinations of Mayor George Moscone and City Supervisor Harvey Milk tolled the death knell for a whole era of liberalism. "Moscone was a Kennedy-like figure and Milk was the country's first openly gay elected representative," says Steve Brown. "It was a heavy blow. There was a very dark period after those killings. The energy was very heavy and negative. When the killer, this ex-cop Dan White, got off with such a light sentence based on his defense as being a family man under a lot of stress, there was an incredible outburst from the normally reserved gay community. A huge riot, dozens of burning police cars." In the eighties, under new mayor Dianne Feinstein, the city's boho-friendly downtown was torn up for redevelopment. Speculators moved in and brand-new office buildings went up. By this point, Tuxedomoon were feeling the pull of Europe, where they found themselves treated like artists, playing professional theaters with proper dressing rooms. According to Brown, "We were touring Europe during the 1980 elections and Blaine joked to interviewers that if Reagan was elected we weren't going back to America. And essentially this is what happened."

Those who stayed in San Francisco found the music scene contracting and becoming less receptive to experimentation. Hardcore punk, based more in the suburbs, began to dominate. "San Francisco doesn't really have an equivalent to Orange County or Long Beach, the strongholds of hardcore in Southern California," says Tupper. "But as you go down the peninsula towards San Jose, or over the Berkeley hills to places like Walnut Creek, the sensibility does get more hardcore. And when hardcore took over, it was mostly a deterioration, less about people trying to do something different, more just trying to fit into a trend." Says Lose, "In the early days, it wasn't necessary for

bands to play fast and loud. One night, you might see Factrix, Nervous Gender, and the Avengers on the same bill, three extremely different acts. But by the early eighties you'd go to a hardcore show and what you'd see is three hard-core bands." According to Bond Bergland, "The really serious experimental people moved to New York." After Factrix ground to a halt, Bergland quit San Francisco, eventually settling on the Lower East Side, where he formed the postindustrial cosmic rock outfit Saqqara Dogs.

Joe Carducci fondly remembers the late-seventies San Francisco scene as "real vital, a place people could get an audience, right up to the end of 1981." The downside was a certain dilettantism. "There's something about San Francisco that encourages you to fold your band up and do a side project or dabble around with somebody else." Another problem with bohemian paradises is that they can breed their own odd kind of parochialism, Carducci argues. "Except for Dead Kennedys and Flipper, those bands didn't take it out on the road. A lot of them felt, I think, that they were way ahead of the rest of the country."

CAREERING:

PiL AND POSTPUNK'S PEAK AND FALL

PUBLIC IMAGE LTD'S big year was 1979. Virgin, still convinced that John Lydon was their hottest property, allowed the group to treat expensive, top-of-the-line studios as their sound laboratories and playpens. After PiL's shaky debut, the music was really starting to come together, culminating at year's end in the classic *Metal Box*. Morale in the PiL camp was high. Indeed, most of the band even lived together as one happy family *chez* Lydon.

Just before embarking on the ill-fated Sex Pistols tour of America, Lydon had shrewdly used his slim earnings to buy a home. Forty-five Gunter Grove was a Victorian terrace house at the scuzzy end of Chelsea. "John had the top part of the house," says Keith Levene. "I had the bottom, and Dave Crowe lived in this bit you had to walk through to get upstairs." Only Wobble kept his distance, preferring to stay with his parents in East London.

Gunter Grove became a major hangout for postpunk luminaries such as the Slits and Don Letts. The fridge was always well stocked with lager, various illicit substances floated around, and Lydon's massive speakers in the communal upstairs living room pounded out a bass-booming reggae soundtrack. Still partially in the mind-set of summer 1977, when he was Public Enemy Number One, Lydon holed up and held court to a retinue of hangers-on and cronies. "I love visitors," he once said. "They are here for my amusement."

It wasn't all cozy laughs in the House of Lydon, though. Cannabis and speed were the main drugs, but heroin was creeping in with some of the coterie. Justifying Lydon's persecution complex, Gunter Grove was regularly subjected to raids by the local drug squad. One such visit in February 1979 took place at 6:00 A.M. Ironically, for once the usually amphetamine-fiending, up-past-dawn members of PiL had gone to bed at a reasonable hour. So the police smashed down the front door, then searched the house, ripping open Lydon's mattress and pulling up the bedroom floorboards. Although they found nothing, Lydon was taken to the local police station and had to walk home in his pajamas.

Another shadow over the Lydon household was death. In 1979, Lydon lost both his mother (to cancer) and his estranged best friend, Sid Vicious (to heroin). Witnessing his mother, the great source of strength and encouragement in his life, slowly slipping away inspired Lydon's lyrics to the single "Death Disco," the first PiL release since their debut album. On the single, Wobble's hard-funk bassline pushes forward like fear rising in your gorge. Levene generates a staggering amount of sound using just a single guitar, simultaneously torturing

the classical-kitsch melody of “Swan Lake,” hacking out rhythm chords that feel like blade touching bone, and scattering a microtonal scree of harmonics. Searing through this swarming anguish, Lydon exorcises his grief like Yoko Ono at her most primal-screamed graphic: “Seeing in your eyes...Silence in your eyes...Final in a fade...Flowers rotting dead.”

Released in June 1979, “Death Disco” remains arguably the most radical single ever to penetrate the U.K. Top 20. When PiL appeared on *Top of the Pops*, the presenter looked ashen faced as he introduced the group and reluctantly uttered the song title. Wobble sat in a dentist’s chair through the whole performance. “Everyone else lined up to get made beautiful, but I just asked the BBC makeup people to have my teeth blacked out, so I could do a big smile at the camera with my front teeth missing.”

Inviting the Grim Reaper to the pop party was one kind of subversion. Just as radical, in its own way, was pairing the word “death” with “disco,” a form of music still despised by most of PiL’s audience. The twelve-inch included two disco-style versions, the “1st 2 Mix” and the “Megga Mix.” In interviews, Lydon declared that disco (and the Raincoats) was the only contemporary music he liked, while Wobble enthused that disco was “very *useful*, practical music.”

PiL’s next single, “Memories,” pursued the dance direction even more intently with its brisk bass, hissing hi-hat, crisp snares, and disco-style breakdowns, in which the sound strips down and the intensity ratchets up several notches. Only Levene’s glassy shrouds of Arabic-sounding guitar and Lydon’s antinostalgia invective are at odds with the dance floor imperative. Baying like a cross between a banshee and a mountain goat, Lydon rails against some nameless fool still living in the past. At the time, critics speculated that Lydon’s target was the spate of nostalgia that had dominated U.K. pop culture in 1979 in the form of the mod and ska revivals. But when he sneers, “This person’s had enough of useless memories,” it feels like Lydon is talking about his own need to sever ties to the past, be it memories of his loved ones or tangled regrets about his years in the Pistols.

“Memories” failed to make the Top 40 on its October 1979 release, but it did whip up fierce anticipation for PiL’s second album. A big chunk of what would become *Metal Box* had already been recorded back in May, with the rest completed sporadically during the summer. Drummer Richard Dudanski departed halfway through the process, so Levene and Wobble did the drumming on several tracks. Martin Atkins, who went on to become PiL’s longest-enduring drummer, was recruited when the album was virtually finished. He received a summons to the studio in the form of an inconsiderate 3:00 A.M. phone call. “When I got to Townhouse [studio], someone says,

“There’s the drum kit, make something up,” Atkins recalls. “Wobble and I wrote ‘Bad Baby’ off the top of our head. What you hear on *Metal Box* is literally that first five minutes of us playing together for the first time. Within half an hour of meeting everybody, I was on the record.” As you might imagine, this wasn’t necessarily the best way for a band to operate. Indeed, “Bad Baby” is the only real blemish on what otherwise stands as not just PiL’s masterpiece, but postpunk’s absolute crowning triumph.

Metal Box is a peculiar blend of real-time spontaneity and obsessive postproduction. Many songs were recorded in one or two takes, and a few were written as they were being played, but it all truly came together during the mix, informed by PiL’s passion for dub and disco. *Metal Box*, Levene declared, was an exercise in “finding out what mixing was, a crash course in production.” What’s striking about the record is how PiL assimilated both the dread feel of roots reggae and the dub aesthetic of subtraction (stripping out instruments, using empty space), without ever resorting to obviously dubby production effects like reverb and echo.

The album starts with “Albatross,” ten minutes of pitiless bass pressure from Wobble, over which Levene scythes the air and Lydon sings like he’s being crushed between two giant slabs of rock. “Albatross” is “Public Image” turned inside out, Lydon’s confidence that he can outrun his past curdling into despair. “Memories” and “Death Disco” follow, the latter retitled “Swan Lake” and now ending in a locked groove, Lydon’s grief and horror frozen for eternity, like Munch’s *The Scream*.

After the surging urgency of the two singles comes the slow suspension and numb trance of “Poptones.” Gyrating around Wobble’s deep, probing bassline, Levene’s guitar scatters a wake of harmonic sparks that merge with the lustrous halo of cymbal spray. Talking about his “circular, jangly,” almost psychedelic playing on “Poptones,” Levene compared its repetitiveness to staring at a white wall. “If you look at it for a second, you’ll see a white wall.... If you keep looking at it for five minutes, you’ll see different colors, different patterns in front of your eyes, especially if you don’t blink. And your ears don’t blink.” Rising to the occasion, Lydon matches the music’s sinister grace with one of his most quietly unsettling lyrics. Sketched in oblique, fractured images, it’s the account of someone who’s been abducted, driven into the woods, and raped. “Hindsight does me no good” intones the victim, bitterly recalling the reassuring “poptones” playing on the car’s cassette player. It’s left unclear whether the song is being sung by a corpse (one lyric says, “You left a hole in the back of my head”) or if the victim escaped and is now cowering and shivering in the wet foliage (another refers to “standing naked in this

back of the woods”). “John’s lyric was so evocative and partly it came from us recording at the Manor and driving through the forest near the studio,” says Wobble. On “Poptones,” as with other *Metal Box* songs, Lydon’s delivery meshes with Levene’s guitar in a weird, modal place somewhere between Celtic and Arabic. “When someone can’t sing you get these natural voice tones,” explains Wobble. “So PiL’s music was based more around overtones and subharmonics, rather than harmony per se. The Beach Boys we were not! PiL actually had more in common with music from Lapland or China.”

“Poptones” whooshes straight into the Northern Ireland-inspired terror ride of “Careering,” on which Levene abandoned the guitar for ominously hovering and swooping electronic sound-shapes created on the Prophet 5, an early and expensive form of polyphonic synth. Then comes “No Birds Do Sing,” PiL’s finest recording, as far as Levene is concerned. Wobble and Dudanski set up a foundation-shaking groove, over which Lydon intones another scalpel-sharp lyric, this time dissecting suburbia’s “layered mass of subtle props,” the serene narcosis of its “bland, planned idle luxury.” Levene’s guitar emits an eerie, metallic foam that’s simultaneously entrancing and insidious. The instrumental that follows, “Graveyard,” is disco music for a skeleton’s ball. It really sounds like dem bones doing the shake, rattle, ’n’ roll. After that, *Metal Box* briefly loses its way with the underdeveloped “The Suit” and “Bad Baby,” then recovers dramatically with the last three songs: the psychodisco of “Socialist,” all dry, processed drums and synth blips; the thug-funk stampede of “Chant,” Lydon ranting about street violence and wet-liberal *Guardian* readers; and the unexpected Satie-esque poignancy of “Radio 4,” with its sighing synths and gently sobbing bass.

In honor of reggae and disco’s twelve-inch aesthetic, and to ensure the highest possible sound quality, PiL insisted on releasing the album as three 45 rpm records, rather than on a single 33 rpm disc. “We were celebrating the idea of twelve-inch singles, prereleases, slates,” says Levene. “With that format, you got a better bass sound.” The idea of putting the three discs inside a matte gray film canister came from Dennis Morris, Lydon’s photographer friend. *Metal Box*’s striking packaging was possibly PiL’s most impressive feat in terms of breaking with standard rock procedures. It effectively deconstructed the notion of “the album,” encouraging people to listen to the tracks in any order. “The idea is that you definitely don’t play it from side one to side six,” Wobble explained. “You just put on one song or two and leave it at that.”

The unusual packaging also appealed to PiL for reasons of sheer malicious perversity. Three unsleeved discs snugly crammed into the circular canister and separated only by circles of paper were hard to

remove without scratching the vinyl. “We were turned on by the idea that it would be difficult to open the can and get the records out,” admits Levene. This prank cost PiL dearly. “Virgin called us for a meeting and said, ‘Look, if you want to do it in a tin, it’s going to cost sixty-six thousand pounds extra. We can only do this if you give us a third of your advance back.’”

Released shortly before Christmas 1979, *Metal Box* was almost universally garlanded with praise. One measure of its colossal stature was that *NME* put John Lydon on the cover of its November 24 issue, but with no interview inside, just a full-page review of *Metal Box*. The timing was perfect. The second half of 1979 saw postpunk reaching its peak of popularity, with epochal festivals such as September’s Futurama, one night of which was headlined by PiL.

Postpunk was cresting creatively, and accordingly basked in a glorious, if short-lived, consensus of admiration from critics and fans alike. In *NME*’s Christmas issue, the writers’ Top Five Albums of 1979 listed Talking Heads’ *Fear of Music* at number one and *Metal Box* at number two, followed by Joy Division’s *Unknown Pleasures*, the Jam’s *Setting Sons*, and Gang of Four’s *Entertainment!* Delayed release dates and transatlantic time lag meant that postpunk’s approval rating peaked in the United States the following year, when PiL and Talking Heads (with *Remain in Light*) made the top five of the *Village Voice*’s annual nationwide poll of critics.

By definition, though, peaks precede plummets. Indeed, there’s a sense in which musical golden ages engineer their own endings. Records such as *Metal Box* and *Unknown Pleasures*, by dint of their very originality, ensure that they’ll be copied by lesser groups whose imaginations have been overpowered. In pop, every wave of innovation inevitably installs a host of new clichés and conventions. In the wake of PiL and Joy Division, a new underground of gloomy groups such as the Sound and Killing Joke emerged. By its second incarnation in 1980, Futurama was mocked as an angst rock version of the U.K. heavy-metal festival at Castle Donington, its grim flocks of overcoat-clad boys as uniform as the denim hordes that followed Iron Maiden.

Paradoxically, the clone army also put huge pressure on the pioneers to keep moving to new frontiers. PiL started 1980 with huge advantages. They still had Virgin’s support. Despite its experimentalism and high retail price, *Metal Box* had done well commercially, selling out the 50,000-copy limited-edition canister format by February, after which it was re-pressed as a conventional double album called *Second Edition*. But as the year proceeded, the challenge of surpassing their own landmark record seemed to paralyze PiL.

At first, PiL basked in the acclaim. A confessed TV addict and lazy sod, Lydon told *Sounds*, “If I could get away with it I wouldn’t even walk. I’d love a mobile bed. One thing I’ve never understood is people complaining about bed sores. That’s a luxury, isn’t it?” In April 1980, PiL deigned to tour the United States, but only on the least-strenuous schedule possible. Ten American dates were spread across three and a half weeks. Drummer Atkins recalls spending three nights in Boston, in his own hotel suite, for just one gig and a couple of radio interviews.

Despite its easygoing pace, the short trapeze across America turned PiL off the idea of touring for good. Playing live had never been a passion for Lydon or Levene. The latter declared, “I’d rather send out a video of us than do a thirty-date tour.” Wobble, though, enjoyed connecting with the audience, which Lydon mocked as “this whole condescending attitude of playing for the kids.”

Twenty years old and bursting with energy (not all of it natural), Jah Wobble felt increasingly frustrated by PiL’s inactivity on all fronts. He squirmed with embarrassment at the yawning gap between what PiL professed itself to be (not a band, but a communications corporation) and what they achieved (fuck all, really). Levene still talked grandly in interviews about doing movie soundtracks, making video albums, even designing musical equipment such as a drum synthesizer and a portable recording studio the size of a briefcase. But these were pipe dreams at best, pure bullshit at worst. “That whole idea of the umbrella corporation...even at the time I thought, ‘Fuck, what are we gonna do? We’re going to make a *film*?’” laughs Wobble. “‘We’re going to do *nothing*!’ And that irritated certain people, because I’d take the piss a bit.”

More seriously frustrating for Wobble was PiL’s indolence when it came to making records. He’d already made a few solo singles and in May 1980 released his first album, the wonderfully goofy *The Legend Lives On...Jah Wobble in “Betrayal.”* His gesture of independence triggered the first major crack in PiL’s regal facade. In August, the bassist left the group in a cloud of acrimony. Officially the dispute concerned Wobble’s reuse of some PiL backing tracks on *The Legend Lives On*. But as part of its “umbrella company” concept, PiL had always intended to diversify with solo releases as well as nonmusical projects. “Versioning” reggae riddims was a widespread practice in Lydon’s beloved Jamaica, so what exactly was the problem with Wobble’s thrifty recycling? In truth, the tension within PiL had been building as far back as the later stages of recording *Metal Box*. “The feeling got quite bad,” says Wobble, “so I’d go off and do the rhythm tracks by myself in Gooseberry Studios in Chinatown.” Wobble’s frustration mounted during the mixing stage of *Metal Box*, when

Levene hogged the board and hardly allowed him any creative input.

Another grievance was the irregularity and paucity of Wobble's PiL wages. "I was on sixty pounds a week and even struggling to get that." PiL's employment practices generally left a lot to be desired. After the American tour, Atkins was summarily fired, purely and simply, he claims, so that PiL could avoid paying him a weekly wage when the band was inactive. Later in 1980, Atkins was rehired when PiL started recording their third album. "PiL wasn't run like a business," says Atkins. "It would take me five attempts of going across London from Willesden Green to Chelsea before I could get anyone at Gunter Grove to open the door and give me my sixty pounds. And I'd spend half of it on speed before I'd got home. If it was a Thursday, I'd probably stay at Gunter Grove until Sunday. We'd all be up watching *Apocalypse Now*, speeding."

In his last months as a member of PiL's dysfunctional family, Wobble told *Sounds*, "I think sometimes we border on psychosis. I'm not using that word lightly. I really mean psychosis. In other words we lose touch with reality." All through the second half of 1980, rumors circulated of ugly vibes at Gunter Grove, including stories of hard drugs and Lydon's degeneration into a paranoid recluse. The regular police raids didn't help with the latter, and Lydon had also recently been traumatized by a brief stint in Mountjoy, an infamous Irish prison, following an altercation with two off-duty cops in a Dublin pub. Factor in the amphetamine intake and one can see why a poster on the wall at Gunter Grove declared: "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you."

"It was a Hitler's bunker vibe, all the paranoia," says Wobble. "It added to the edge. It was a bit like that Nic Roeg film *Performance*." In *Performance*, Mick Jagger plays a burned-out sixties-rock superstar holed up in his Georgian terrace house in Powis Square, Ladbroke Grove (the same hippie-colonized, dilapidated area of West London where Rough Trade was based). "I don't think John ever regarded himself as a rock god as such, that would be unfair," says Wobble. "But there was that kind of general atmosphere of withdrawing from the world a bit. Sort of, 'in *here*, this drama, is where it's at,' rather than going out there into the world."

Looking back, Wobble sees PiL as an opportunity that was literally wasted, ruined by drugs and lethargy. The situation was worsened by the fact that the protagonists weren't even in the same chemical head space. He once described PiL as "four emotional cripples on four different drugs." Today he quips, "If we had been on the same drugs, we might have kept it together a bit longer! Some people were on heroin, some on speed, some on very strong cannabis, and some on combinations thereof. Me, I was a speed freak. I was into powders in a

big way. Drinking and powders.”

Nowadays Levene is cagey about talking about his heroin years in any detail, but in a 1983 interview for *NME* he was candid about its effects on PiL, confessing, “I was dabbling with it when we formed the band. Then I was doing it constantly for about three years.” *Flowers of Romance*, the troubled follow-up to *Metal Box*, coincided with the worst stage of Levene’s addiction. “When you have to do something creative, it’s very hard. When we did *Flowers*, I tried to make the session coincide with the part of the day where I really had the least amount in my system.” Yet in the 1983 profile Levene also insisted that he “used to run PiL when I was on junk.” Despite having a full-time member, Dave Crowe, who’d been recruited to organize and keep accounts, Levene claimed that *he* ended up micromanaging every aspect of the band: “I used to make all the music, get the money out of Virgin, make sure the record was promoted, find out if we were on *Top of the Pops* that week.... When I analyzed the situation, [the heroin use] was because basically I was very lonely, and very scared, and under a lot of pressure.”

One side effect of heroin is constipation. Creatively, if not literally, Levene had a chronic case of blockage during the sessions for the third album, which began in October 1980 at Virgin’s Manor studio. Several days passed with PiL’s playing video games and watching movies while being waited on hand and foot. “There was a *lot* of avoiding the studio going on!” Levene says. “I’d set up all the equipment, lots of funny little synth toys, and I’d be twiddling, getting sounds, but not necessarily making a record.” With Wobble gone, the old alchemy—the way the bassist’s untrained, intuitive approach would catalyze Levene’s warped virtuosity—had disappeared. “It would have been better if Wobble had stuck around,” admits Levene.

Finally, a breakthrough of sorts occurred several days into the session. Instructing the engineer to keep the tape rolling no matter what, Levene tapped out some percussion patterns on a strange bamboo instrument that Virgin boss Richard Branson had brought back from Bali, then added synth sounds (“the animals” inside the percussive jungle, as he puts it). The result, entitled “Hymie’s Him,” was the weakest track on *Flowers of Romance*, but it broke the deadlock and gave the group a direction. Making a virtue of Wobble’s absence and Levene’s aversion to the guitar (which, according to Atkins, was partly due to his arms’ being too swollen to play the instrument), PiL decided to orient the new album around drum sounds, pursuing a percussive, tribal feel Levene described as “very acoustic, human...but very fuckin’ heavy.”

Moving to another costly Virgin studio, West London’s Townhouse, PiL procured a bunch of secondhand acoustic instruments—ukulele,

saxophone, banjo, violin—and generated raw sonic material for sculpting at the mixing board. *Flowers* is the only PiL album where Lydon, the nonmusician, actually plays instruments, such as the three-stringed banjo on “Phenagen” (a track named after a heavy-duty sleeping pill). Levene talked about deliberately using “John’s total ineptitude to an artistic advantage.”

Whereas *Metal Box* pushed rock’s envelope to its fullest extent, *Flowers* tried to burst through into a totally postrock space. “Levene had this thing, ‘I’m not going to play anything that’s ever been played before,’” recalls Vivien Goldman, a regular visitor to Gunter Grove. “Talk about hubris!” On *Flowers*, Levene’s guitar appeared only on “Go Back” (self-parodically) and “Phenagen” (psychedelically reversed). At the same time, he didn’t really take the synth dabblings of *Metal Box* any further. *Flowers* really was all about using the studio itself as the primary instrument.

The album came together in a bizarrely disjointed fashion. Summoned to the studio to lay down beats, Atkins found Lydon and Levene weren’t there, so he worked closely with engineer Nick Launay to create striking rhythm tracks. “I’d fallen asleep with my Mickey Mouse watch against my ear and then woken up to that sound. So we put the watch on a floor-tom skin so it would resonate, and then Nick harmonized, looped, and delayed that sound, and I drummed to it, and that became ‘Four Enclosed Walls.’” Atkins was also heavily involved in the album’s standout track, “Under the House,” a stampeding herd of tribal tom toms with string sounds shrieking across the stereo field. On that track, Lydon’s processed vocals seem to emanate from his throat like malignant gas or ectoplasm. The lyrics allude to a supernatural experience. Some accounts claim it’s about an actual ghost that haunted the Manor studio, although Levene believes it’s about a more abstract sense of evil to which Lydon was unusually attuned.

Flowers was completed by the end of November 1980, but Virgin, who hated the record, delayed its release until April of the following year. In the meantime, as a stocking stuffer for PiL fans, they rushed out that most rockist of stopgap measures, the live album. Reviewing the pretty redundant *Paris au Printemps* in *NME*, Vivien Goldman alluded to *Flowers*’s “severe birth pangs,” but with her insider’s knowledge confidently pronounced that PiL had “broken another sound-barrier.”

Released as a single in March 1981, the title track from *Flowers of Romance* did live up to Goldman’s hype about PiL’s inventing “a new kind of rhythm.” It cracked the U.K. Top 30 and resulted in another deranged *Top of the Pops* performance that saw Levene pounding the drums in a lab technician’s white coat, Jeannette Lee dwarfed by her

double bass, and Lydon, dressed as a white-collared vicar, sawing dementedly on a fiddle. Such was PiL's eminence that when the album finally arrived in April, it was automatically hailed as another paradigm-shattering masterwork. More skeptical commentators, though, noted the distinct lack of *work* involved, from the paltry length (thirty-two minutes) to its desultory packaging (a Polaroid of Jeannette Lee with a rose between her teeth). Tracks such as "Four Enclosed Walls" and "Phenagen" may have been startling on first listen with their extreme sonic treatments, stereo-panned sounds, and Lydon's prayer-wail ululations, but they didn't linger in the memory.

Essentially, *Flowers* was a reprise of the more outré antics of Europe's prepunk vanguard, bands such as Faust, Cluster, and even Pink Floyd (from the wackier bits of *Ummagumma* to their abandoned project of recording an album using household objects). Today, *Flowers* actually sounds like a braver mess than it did upon its release. More than aesthetic fearlessness, though, the record was shaped by an unattractive blend of indolence, negativity ("All it amounts to is that we don't like any music at the moment," Levene told *Rolling Stone*), and let's-see-what-we-can-get-away-with gall.

Where the record ultimately fails, though, is in its emotional range. Lydon's palette of derision and disgust had curdled into self-parody. Of the leave-me-alone tantrum "Banging the Door," Lydon later said, "It's horrible to listen back to that kind of paranoia." A creepy account of being seduced by a female journalist, "Track 8" is particularly repellent, with its vindictive imagery of fleshy tunnels "erupting in fat" and naked, bulbous bodies betraying Lydon's Catholic fear of the flesh. In *Sounds*, the self-confessed "sexless little beast" decreed sex "definitely over-rated. I think the human body's vile and I wish everybody would appreciate that. Look at people's faces: they're vile, big, spotty blotches."

Lydon's misanthropy reached its dismal nadir with the infamous PiL show at New York's Ritz on May 15, 1981. Intended as a sort of performance art/video spectacle, the show was hastily pulled together by Levene, his genuine excitement about multimedia dragging along the unenthused Lydon and Lee. Unfortunately, the Ritz was not an art space like downtown Manhattan's the Kitchen. It drew a rock 'n' roll crowd, who were certainly not happy about paying twelve dollars to see the band only in "live video" form. Skulking behind the venue's gigantic video screen, Levene and Lee made an amorphous cacophony. Lydon taunted the audience with quips like "Aren't you getting your money's worth?" and direct incitements such as "I'm safe. You're not throwing enough. You're what I call a passive audience." After twelve minutes, the crowd erupted into a full-blown riot. Levene, darting from behind the screen, got struck on the head by a flying bottle.

During the year of silence that followed the release of *Flowers of Romance*, PiL relocated to New York. Staying at first in hotels and then, as Virgin's advance on the next album ran out, moving to a large loft apartment, PiL sank into a quagmire of apathy. Lydon spent whole days in bed watching TV, getting fat on lager and torpor. There was no shortage of sycophantic yes-men who eagerly trooped out to replenish the beer supply. "What was good about PiL when it worked was that he had a few *no*-men around," says Levene, "like me and Wobble."

By this point, Levene had quit heroin, but his relationship with Lydon was crumbling. What had been unique about the PiL setup—a world-famous rock star working with an avant-garde virtuoso in a major-label subsidized context of "do what the fuck you like"—slowly unraveled. Lydon, the nonmusician, began to resent his dependence on Levene's musical ability. Levene, dependent on the Lydon brand name, chafed because all the media attention was on the singer. Early in PiL's career, Lydon had made strenuous and sincere attempts to present the group as a real collective, not just Johnny Rotten's new backing band. But by 1982, says Levene, "It was like John had decided to take that line in our first single literally: 'Public Image belongs to me.'"

Another source of confusion and conflict was the question of where to go after *Flowers*, which had sold poorly. That kind of untrammelled avant-gardism was clearly not going to keep PiL solvent. In the short term, the group resorted to "hit and runs," one-off gigs done cynically for the fat fees they could demand on the strength of the Johnny Rotten legend. When it came to PiL's recordings, a strategic shift toward accessibility seemed the best course. This was signposted by the working title of the fourth album, *You Are Now Entering a Commercial Zone*, and the oddly radio-friendly sound of the LP's first side, sort of "death disco" with most of the death removed. At a press conference in Hollywood, Lydon adamantly stressed that PiL was not arty and wanted to be accessible.

Tensions reached a head in mid-1983 over the single "This Is Not a Love Song." When Levene entered the studio to salvage what he deemed a disastrous mix, he found himself under close surveillance from Martin Atkins, now Lydon's right-hand man. After a fraught, all-night session, Levene received a phone call from Lydon, who was in Los Angeles, ordering him to "get out of my fucking studio." Following the departure of PiL's de facto musical director, Lydon hired a bunch of session musicians as his new backing band (Atkins doggedly hanging in there as the drummer), did a lucrative tour of Japan, and rerecorded the album.

Toward the end of his PiL tenure, Levene had noticed a weird

thing happening. "John Lydon sort of became Johnny Rotten again." In truth, the singer had never voluntarily relinquished "Rotten." Malcolm McLaren legally prevented Lydon from using his stage name for a few years, a blow the singer turned around and made into a grand *this-is-the-real-me* gesture. Living in America, Lydon found himself feted by awestruck fans and courted by big-shot managers who encouraged him to exploit his legend to the hilt. Eventually he decided, or realized, that the Sex Pistols adventure was where his rock-myth bread was buttered. After Levene left, the ex-Pistol started to do something during PiL gigs he'd once sworn that he'd never do again: sing the Pistol anthems "Anarchy in the U.K." and "God Save the Queen." A decade and a half later, he re-formed the Sex Pistols as a touring nostalgia revue, reneging on everything PiL represented.

2-TONE AND THE SKA RESURRECTION

JUST AS “DEATH DISCO” started sliding down the U.K. charts in July 1979, another single shot up like a rocket. “Gangsters,” the Specials’ debut, shares a surprising amount with PiL’s single: a bassline that pounds against your rib cage like a heart full of fear, baleful vocals (singer Terry Hall actually modeled his glowering persona on Johnny Rotten), and a sinuous, snake-charmer melody that’s almost like a cartoon version of Lydon’s muezzin wail. “Cartoon” is the key word, though. While the lyrics conjured menace and corruption (“We’re living in real gangster times”), the Specials’ manic exuberance made “Gangsters” pure pop.

The Specials and their comrades—the Beat, Madness, and the Selecter, all of whom started out on the Specials’ label, 2-Tone—dived into a yawning void in the market that had emerged by 1979, a consumer demand for a sound that came out of punk but was instant, full of teen appeal, and above all danceable. The postpunk vanguard, for all their experiments with funk, really made music for “heads” at home, not bodies on the floor. PiL’s “Memories” and Gang of Four’s “At Home He Feels Like a Tourist,” those groups’ most blatantly disco singles, hadn’t exactly set discotheques on fire. 2-Tone, crucially, was all about dance music played by live bands. The movement reclaimed dance music from disco, which was based around DJs’ playing records, not live performance. 2-Tone also ignored the innovations of seventies black music, all the advances involving intricate production and arrangement, and instead reached back to the rawer, high-energy black sounds of sixties soul and Jamaican ska, when a record was barely more than a document of the band playing in the studio. Appropriately, the Specials’ first number one single in the U.K. would actually be a *live* EP.

The Specials, the group’s self-titled debut album, makes for a striking contrast with *Metal Box*, which was released less than a month later in the winter of 1979. Where *Metal Box* was a studio concoction, *The Specials* was sparsely produced—by Elvis Costello—to capture the band’s live energy. Where *Metal Box*’s featureless packaging refused image, *The Specials* reveled in it, the cover showing the seven members of the band looking supercool in porkpie hats, thin ties, and sharp sixties suits. PiL’s matte gray canister was starkly functional, a pointed exercise in demystification, but *The Specials*’s black-and-white sleeve harked back to an older glamour, resurrecting the monochrome feel of early sixties British pop shows such as *Ready Steady Go* (from before the introduction of color television), early rock ’n’ roll films such as *A Hard Day’s Night*, and Northern social-realist movies such as

Saturday Night, Sunday Morning.

Yet the social reality the Specials' songs depicted was bang up-to-date and essentially identical to that addressed by PiL, Gang of Four, and the rest of the postpunk vanguard. *The Specials* is a snapshot of Britain in 1979, on the cusp between failed socialism in retreat and reenergized conservatism on the warpath. Considering the group's outward appearance of boisterous fun, it's striking how *cheerless* their songs actually are. In "Nite Klub," the wage slaves piss away their paychecks with beer that already tastes like piss. "Too Much Too Young" starts as a taunting diatribe against an ex-girlfriend who's lost her youth to premature motherhood ("try wearing a cap," jeers Hall), then turns rueful and almost compassionate for the life they've both lost ("You done too much, much too young/Now you're married with a son when you should be having fun with me").

"Too Much Too Young" and the similarly themed "Stupid Marriage" both recall British kitchen-sink cinedramas of the sixties such as *Up the Junction*. The eerie thing about *The Specials* is that this music *sounds* as monochrome as those social-realist films *look*. The group's oxymoronic vibe of lively bleakness dramatized the basic 2-Tone mise-en-scène, a dance floor hemmed in by desperation on every side. "Concrete Jungle," the standout track on the album, takes a snapshot of street life in 1979, a record year for racial attacks and muggings. Embellished with the sounds of breaking glass, "Concrete Jungle" is driven by a disco-style walking bassline that periodically accelerates to a panicked sprint, as the protagonist starts gibbering "animals are after me" and "leave me alone, leave me alone."

Few urban jungles are as wall-to-wall concrete as the Specials' hometown of Coventry. Located in the West Midlands, Britain's heartland of engineering and vehicle manufacture, Coventry was pounded relentlessly by the Luftwaffe during World War II. Like its neighbors Birmingham and Wolverhampton, the city was rapidly rebuilt according to the modernist architectural ideas that prevailed after the war, resulting in a drab sprawl of tower blocks, cement gray shopping centers, and tangled motorway overpasses. In one of the first music press features on the Specials, *Sounds's* Dave McCullough describes 2-Tone's birthplace with brutal precision:

Huge monoliths of planning diarrhea stretch mercilessly to the blue sky above like they own the very souls of the few beings that totter out from their concrete cocoons, faceless and drained.... [The Specials' own neighborhood] is dissected with subways that seem to throb with an invisible tension and deserted "play spaces," swings and trickling streams that poke fun at the surrounding slabs of gloom.

No one would have described Coventry as pretty. Indeed, guidebooks to England usually struggle to summon up *anything* to entice tourists to visit the town. But it was a vibrant place until the late seventies. The West Midlands was the success story of the postwar British economy, thanks to pent-up consumer demand for cars. Like that other motor city, Detroit, the compensation for living somewhere so harsh was plentiful jobs and good pay. But upheavals in the world market for cars in the early seventies began to affect the West Midlands, causing unemployment rates, which for most of the postwar period were half the national average, to rise steadily. When Thatcher's monetarist policies mauled British industry at the end of the seventies, the boomtowns of Coventry and Birmingham became ghost towns almost overnight.

In the fifties and sixties, Caribbean immigrants moved to the West Midlands for jobs. As a result, there was a long-established local tradition of black and white musicians intermingling. Before punk, most of the Specials' five white and two black members had apprenticed in soul bands of one kind or another. Jerry Dammers—the Specials' founder, chief songwriter, and keyboard player—tried to persuade the groups he used to play in, such as the Cissy Stone Soul Band, to play his own songs. "Before the New Wave happened it was just unthinkable to do original songs," he recalled. "It wasn't until the Sex Pistols came along that you realized that you could get away with doing your own songs." Terry Hall was equally galvanized by the Pistols, especially Johnny Rotten. "It was just the way he stood onstage and gazed for half an hour," he recalled. "I'd never seen anything like it. His stance was like an extension of standing still." Hall developed his own "meaningful glare," an unblinking scowl accented by his heavy eyebrows.

The Specials were as mixed socially as they were racially. The rebellious son of a clergyman, Dammers had been a very young mod in the sixties, then a hippie, and then—in a bizarre shift—a skinhead. Not all British skinheads were neo-Nazis, as the stereotype has it. They had a complicated relationship with the U.K.'s new postimperial multiculturalism. Skins generally got on well with the Caribbean population. The second generation of immigrants were the skins' contemporaries at school and lived in the same working-class neighborhoods. Skins admired and emulated Jamaican style (that's where their cropped hair came from), while ska and rocksteady were their preferred forms of dance music. At the same time, skinheads had a frictional interaction with the more recent immigrants from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, who in the 1970s had not assimilated. Hence, the "folk devil" reputation of skinheads as thugs into "Paki

bashing” (and hippie bashing, too) and the subsequent identification of the skinhead subculture in its entirety with the National Front, British Movement, and other neofascist parties. For many, though, being a skin was just about having a cool look and belonging to a youth tribe.

After school, Dammers studied art at Lanchester Polytechnic in Coventry, where he specialized in animated films and met fellow art student Horace Panter, who became the Specials’ bassist. Another former mod, drummer John Bradbury was also a fine-arts graduate. Guitarist Roddy Radiation had paintbrush experience of a different sort as a decorator for the local council. Second guitarist Lynval Golding supported his wife and daughter working as an engineer. Singer Terry Hall had a skilled working-class job as a clerk at a coin dealer. He was the perfect mouthpiece for Dammers’s lyrics, lending them an authenticity they might otherwise not have had. Hall knew proletarian life from inside but, like Mark E. Smith and John Lydon, was too piercingly intelligent not to see right through its treadmills and traps.

Neville Staple—the seventh Special and, alongside Golding, its second Caribbean member—was the group’s resident rude boy. In 1960s Jamaica, the rude boys had been ska’s hard-core following. Unemployed youths who dressed slick and got into trouble with the law, the rude boys resembled the preconscious Malcolm X when he was just a zoot-suited street hoodlum. They were “rude” because they had insubordinate spirit and a raw sense of injustice, but they hadn’t yet acquired the ideological discipline of militants such as the Nation of Islam or the spiritual focus of Rastafarianism. “Compared to the rest of the band, I came from a rough-and-tumble part of the world,” Staple says. His crime sheet included burglary and disturbing the peace. He’d participated in a revenge attack on some National Front skinheads, and he used to steal timber to build the speakers for a sound system he helped operate. It was through his knowledge of sound equipment that Staple ended up working as a roadie for the Specials. At gigs he would hang out by the mixing board. During the group’s support stint on the Clash’s 1978 Out On Parole Tour, Staple grabbed the mic and started “toasting” over the music. He’d grown up around blues dances and sound systems, absorbing the “DJ talkover” chatting of Big Youth, U-Roy, and Prince Jazzbo. In the Specials, Staple’s gruff patois and rowdy yet baleful presence made for a superb contrast with Hall’s utterly English, alternately wry and sour intonation.

Initially, Dammers’s concept for the Specials was “punk reggae.” But for a long while the group struggled to integrate the two styles, even to the limited extent the Clash had managed on “White Man in

Hammersmith Palais.” “We had songs where part of the songs were reggae, then they’d go into a rock section, then perhaps into reggae,” Dammers recalled, “and it would throw people off.” Eventually the Specials turned to ska as the solution: They would wind pop history back to a time when Jamaican music and the early forms of midsixties British rock (basically sped-up R&B) were much closer. Dammers also felt that contemporary roots reggae was “religious music. When we’ve played with some black bands, these dreads have come up to me and said we should leave Jah-Jah music alone. So we do leave Jah-Jah music alone and go back to when reggae was more just straight dance music.”

Ska began at the end of the fifties as a Jamaican twist on black American dance music from New Orleans, “upside-down R&B,” as guitarist Ernest Ranglin put it. The term “ska” is most likely derived from the characteristic ska-ska-ska-ska attack of the rhythm guitar stressing the “afterbeat,” which intensifies the music’s choppy, chugging feel. The Specials took the staccato pulse of sixties ska and amped it up with punk’s frenetic energy. The difference is most audible when comparing one of the Specials’ many cover versions to the ska original. The sixties source invariably sounds sluggish in comparison, less aggressive, but also simpler in arrangement compared to the remake.

The man generally credited with inventing the “afterbeat,” singer/producer Prince Buster, was even bigger in Britain than in Jamaica. He released more than six hundred singles in the U.K. between 1962 and 1967 and toured there frequently, often escorted between gigs by a phalanx of scooter-riding mods. The Specials upheld the mod tradition of worshipping Buster. “Gangsters” is loosely based on his “Al Capone,” replacing the original lyrics with new words about the record business’s sharks and shysters, but “sampling” the skidding car chase sounds from the original record. “Stupid Marriage” steals its courtroom trial scenario—Staple as Judge Roughneck meting out harsh sentences to rude boys—from Buster’s 1967 hit “Judge Dread.”

Love of Prince Buster’s music united the U.K. ska revivalists, but Madness outdid everyone with their debut single, their sole release for 2-Tone. On one side, a version of Buster’s “Madness Is Gladness” made for an instant manifesto. On the other side, “The Prince” paid luminous tribute, dropping references to Buster’s “Ghost Dance” (itself an homage to the sound system operators of *his* youth) and to Orange Street, the Kingston boulevard that doubles as Buster’s birthplace and the center of Jamaica’s music biz. “The Prince” sounds joyous, but lines like “Although I’ll keep on running/I’ll never get to Orange Street” capture the poignant pathos of the mod dream of escaping England through an obsessive identification with black music and

black style.

When the ska revival bands appeared in 1979, they initially seemed like just one element of a larger mod revival, partly triggered by the release of *Quadrophenia*, the movie based on the Who's 1973 concept album, and partly by the Jam, who emerged at the same time as the class of 1977 punk bands but who always seemed more like a sixties throwback. The original 1960s mod scene was based in the British working-class passion for up-tempo black music, sharp clothes, short hair, and amphetamines. "Looking good's the answer/And living by night," sang Ian Page of Secret Affair, the most successful of the nouveau mod bands that swarmed forth in 1979. The couplet crystallizes the mod "solution" to the impasses of British society with its class structures and crushing mundanity: style, soul, and speed (not just the drug, but whizzing around town on sleek, streamlined Vespa scooters). The Jam's singer, Paul Weller, also caught mod's essence when he talked about being into "clean culture" while loathing rock 'n' roll's scuzzy decadence, dirty hippies, and so forth.

The British mod resurgence of 1979 effectively tried to regress to 1966, arresting pop history at that point just before *Sgt. Pepper's* and the ensuing boom of album-oriented, nondanceable progressive music. In the late sixties, those original mods who didn't go the psychedelic/progressive route instead turned into ska-loving skinheads or Motown-fetishizing Northern soul fans. "We're just continuing the line...from the mods and the skinheads," Jerry Dammers declared. In one 1975 feature on Northern soul, a fan scorns "progressive" as nonsense noise for stoned weirdos: "You talk to someone who likes progressive music and they'll say they listen to it just to *listen* to it.... I like music to *dance* to, not to listen to." You can imagine the 2-Tone fans and neomod of 1979 having the same baffled and derisive response to PiL or Cabaret Voltaire. Postpunk was dub-spacious, heard at its best on twelve-inch records (hence *Metal Box* and the Cabs' *2X45* album) and hi-fi stereos. In contrast, the 2-Tone bands and the new mod groups made seven-inch music. Brisk, punchy, near mono, and designed for transistor radios, it flashed back to the midsixties golden age of the single.

One thing the mod resurgence—including 2-Tone—did share with the postpunk bands, though, was a snobbish attitude toward rock as passé and undignified. Screeching, self-indulgent guitars were replaced by taut, punchy horns as the lead instrument, a lone trombone or trumpet in 2-Tone's case, but full-blown brass sections with sixties-soul-inspired bands such as Dexys Midnight Runners. "Kids are starting to get interested in playing brass rather than wanting to be a guitar hero," noted Dexys' member JB approvingly. Keyboards came next in the hierarchy, not synthesizers but electric organs such as the Hammond, which could supply a choppy, rhythmic

pulse or be played in a pianistic style for rollicking, rinky-dink embellishments. With a few exceptions (notably the Jam itself), guitar was restricted to a rhythmic role, a scratchy presence low in the mix, and rarely allowed to emit anything that resembled a solo.

Along with an aversion to guitar heroics, the main thing the new mods and the ska revivalists had in common was a love of dressing sharp. “The clothes are almost as important as the music as far as I’m concerned,” Terry Hall declared. The 2-Tone look jumbled up elements from all phases of mod and skin fashion: Fred Perry and Ben Sherman sport shirts, mohair suits, black slip-on loafers, Sta-Prest trousers, porkpie hats, white socks, suspenders. Like the music, the fashion was adapted from black style. “It was a thing young black kids did for years,” says Staple. “Go to tailors and get measured up for tonic suits, mohairs, Prince of Wales, and pay money down on the suits every week in installments. That was how they used to do it in Jamaica, too, white shirt and slim pencil ties, a nice slick look.”

The 2-Tone label’s defining stylistic motif was what Staple calls “the check,” the alternation of black and white, which not only looked great but symbolized the movement’s ideals of racial harmony and musical hybridity. This imagery, along with the mixed-race lineup of the leading 2-Tone bands and interview comments such as Dammers’s description of racism as “like some kind of mental illness, like fear of spiders,” probably did more for the antiracism cause than a thousand Anti Nazi League speeches.

The thoroughly modern multicultural resonance of its black-and-white music and clothes gave 2-Tone an edge over the empty nostalgia of straightforwardly mod revivalist bands such as Secret Affair. By the fall of 1979, 2-Tone mania ruled Britain. On November 8, Madness, the Specials, and the Selecter appeared on the same edition of *Top of the Pops* playing their Top 20 hits. Later that month, the Beat’s debut single, a remake of Smokey Robinson’s “Tears of a Clown,” was the 2-Tone label’s fifth single, and its fifth hit. Dammers’s dream of 2-Tone as a modern Motown—an invincible hit factory with a diverse roster united by a common sound—seemed to be coming true.

When “Gangsters”—originally released independently, with Rough Trade’s support—started to take off, the Specials had been chased by every record company in London. But Dammers held out for a label deal, for 2-Tone as an entity, and got one from Chrysalis. The alliance between the major label and the Coventry independent required Chrysalis to fund the recording of fifteen 2-Tone singles a year and release at least ten. After the chart success of “Tears of a Clown,” though, the Beat jumped ship and started their own label, Go Feet, which formed a 2-Tone-like alliance with Arista. Madness also bolted from 2-Tone after just one single and signed to Stiff Records. Neither

group wanted to be subsumed within Dammers's "new Motown" vision.

The Beat—who were forced to call themselves the English Beat in America, because a domestic group had dibs on the name—originally came from Handsworth, a racially mixed area in Birmingham immortalized by the U.K. reggae band Steel Pulse with their *Handsworth Revolution* album. Like the Specials, the Beat were poster boys for integration and the Caribbean contribution to British pop life. The group's front line was an almost too perfect blend of male beauty and political correctness, as blond singer Dave Wakeling's dulcet croon meshed with the patois chat of Jamaican pretty boy Ranking Roger. In addition to toasting on sound systems and at Birmingham's famous nightclub Barbarella's, Roger had been the orange-haired drummer in a punk band, the Dum Dum Boys. As for the rest of the Beat, the scrawny, pasty-faced figures of bassist David Steele and guitarist Andy Cox contrasted with the black bulk of Saxa, a sixtysomething saxophonist recruited after the group found him playing jazz in a Handsworth pub.

Like the Specials, the Beat's concept was punk meets reggae, "high energy with fluid movement," as Wakeling put it. But in the Beat's hands, the results were more like fast skank than ska. On songs such as "Hands Off, She's Mine" (the group's second Top 10 hit in early 1980), bubbling bass braids itself around rimshot drums and shimmering rhythm guitar. "Too Nice to Talk To" adds Chic-style bass and African-flavored guitar to the speedskank, resulting in an iridescent chittering sound that suggested Soweto township disco. "Mirror in the Bathroom," their biggest hit, was even more original sounding. Weirdly, its jittery guitars and sinuous bass recall nothing so much as Joy Division's "Transmission," although maybe "She's Lost Control" is more apt, as "Mirror" is a glimpse into the mind of someone cracking up. Tension and paranoia were the Beat's prime terrain, as heard on songs like "Twist and Crawl" and "All Out to Get You."

When they shifted from the personal to the political, the Beat weren't quite so effective. The only dud in their fabulous sequence of 1980 U.K. hits was the anti-Thatcher anthem "Stand Down Margaret." Still, all the group's royalties from the single went to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. The Beat also contributed to the antinuke benefit album *Life in the European Theatre*. Dave Wakeling confessed, "It is *embarrassing* to think that we could destroy ourselves.... You just feel a prat, for being part of a system that can't do any better than that." For all their brilliance—light seemed to literally dance off the surfaces of their sound—there was something just slightly too earnest about the Beat at times.

That could never be said about Madness. Initially, the North London seven-piece seemed like pure comic relief next to the somber Specials. The keyboards romped and capered, the wheezy-cheesy blare of the sax evoked a vaudevillian vulgarity, the farce of baggy trousers sliding to the ground. "The heavy heavy monster sound," Madness called it. "Our music sounds like fairgrounds and organs," said guitarist Chris Foreman. "It just sounds *nutty*." Both onstage and in their peerless, groundbreaking videos, Madness lived up to the music's antic spirit with dance moves and zany accoutrements that recalled the slapstick music hall routines of their parents' era. Their equivalent to Ranking Roger and Neville Staple was an Irish-Cockney skinhead called Chas Smash, whose job was to shout the band's wacky catchphrases and perform "odd robotic dances," as critic Dick Hebdige put it, "the top half of his body...stiff as a board, all the movement taking place below the knees."

Behind the clowning, though, was an intelligence and sadness that gradually came to the fore. What attracted singer Suggs McPherson to the song-and-dance comedians of the British music hall tradition wasn't just the laughs, he recalled, but the hint of darkness "amongst the rosy cheeks [and] smiling face." Alongside early jolly-ups such as "One Step Beyond" and "Night Boat to Cairo" were singles such as the exquisitely rueful and confused "My Girl" (about a young man who can't seem to make his girlfriend happy or get her to understand that he sometimes needs a bit of space), or the hangdog "Embarrassment" (about a boy who's disgraced his family). The video for "Baggy Trousers" was uproarious, but the song's nostalgia for school days came alloyed with ambivalence and regret. By their third album, *7*, Madness' humor was shadowed with the pathos and bathos of English life. "Cardiac Arrest" is a deceptively jaunty ditty about an office worker who's late for work and suffers a coronary in midcommute. "Grey Day" is as harrowing as anything on the Specials' debut, as the music itself takes a turn to the tragicomic, with bells tolling for all those condemned to a living death of meaningless routine. "The sky outside is wet and gray/So begins another weary day," Suggs intones mournfully, "I wish I could sink without a trace." Amazingly, this portrait of terminal despondency, underpinned by an ominous dubsway of reggae rimshots and heavy bass, was a massive U.K. hit in the spring of 1981.

Despite their allegiances to Jamaican music, Madness picked up a following of ska-loving but racist skins who disrupted gigs with their *Sieg Heils*. The neofascist element in the skinhead subculture fastened on Madness because they were the only 2-Tone band with no black members. Although they'd originally met the Specials at a Rock Against Racism benefit, Madness were initially reluctant to fully

disown the goon squad, whom they considered more confused and ignorant than genuinely hateful. Eventually, the group bowed to pressure from the music press and made the appropriate distancing remarks. Still, it's slightly depressing that the 2-Tone-associated band that had the biggest long-term success was the only one that was all white, while the Selecter, all black except for lead guitarist Neol Davies, were the first major 2-Tone band to fade from public view. The Selecter hit big with the herky-jerky "On My Radio" (a protest against the airwaves being one long "same old show"), but never quite won the public's affection, despite having a charismatic singer in Pauline Black, one of the few women in the 2-Tone stable.

True to its mod origins, ska was a curiously sexless dance craze. Its twitchy energy appealed to the feet, but not the hips. Mining their most fertile seam of embarrassment, Madness' number one hit "House of Fun"—a song about going to buy one's first box of condoms at the drugstore—made sexual awakening seem like a fall from grace into a world of sordid grotesquerie. Reminiscing about "House of Fun," Suggs admitted, "It's funny really because I'm not really sexual in that way, always going on about it." Throughout the 2-Tone realm, songs of love and lust were few and far between.

With the exception of Madness, who hid their sadness behind a lighthearted exterior, what's immediately striking when you look at the key figures of 2-Tone and the whole mod renaissance is the chaste intensity of their zeal. Witness Dammers, the workaholic perfectionist who conjured a mass movement virtually from scratch, Secret Affair's Ian Page with his private army of "glory boys" and his cold-eyed disdain for the dowdy straights, and Paul Weller, who during his Jam days felt like he was "on a mission." It's sheer mod, this amphetaminized obsession with "purity" and the minutiae of style and taste, this polarized vision ardor that divides the world into the righteous and the square. Weller captured the attitude best in the Jam song "Start!" when he rejoices at meeting a soul brother who "loves with a passion called hate," just like him.

Nobody exemplified this purist and slightly puritanical spirit more than Kevin Rowland, the singer and leader of Dexys Midnight Runners, a Birmingham group that at one point was set to sign to 2-Tone but decided they would rather start their own "young soul rebel" movement instead. All scowling fervor and mirthless dedication, Rowland was physically unprepossessing but oozed a weird charisma. His voice was neither strong nor pleasing, but by his sheer will to be soulful Rowland overcame its deficiencies, sounding a bit like Strummer gone Stax.

Rowland had been a punk, fronting a band called the Killjoys, but as the energy of 1977 petered out he sank into disillusionment.

Vintage soul music pulled him out of the slough. "I was totally fed up with everything else at that time and so I started listening to all of Geno's [Washington] old records and any other soul singles I could pick up for ten p[ence] around the markets," he recalled. Convinced that rock was "a spent force," Rowland began to recruit musicians to form his ideal band. At first they played mostly covers of soul classics, but gradually phased them out for new songs written by Rowland and Dexys' other main creative force, Al Archer, all of them couched in a toughened-up version of the high-energy, horn-driven Atlantic-Stax/Volt-style soul of the midsixties.

After a year of rehearsing, Dexys had the sound to match Rowland's "new soul vision." They also had the look. What sold Al Archer on the band was Rowland's concept of "a soul group with a brass section and all looking good." Archer recalled, "At the time, everyone was looking the same. It was a bit postpunk." According to Rowland, "we wanted to be a group that would look like something... a formed group, a project, not just random." Dexys' early image circa their debut single, "Dance Stance," might have been mistaken for an ultrastylized version of council workmen, all woolly hats, donkey jackets, and leather coats, although the inspiration was actually *The Deer Hunter* and *Mean Streets*. Then Dexys switched to an athletic look: hooded tops, ponytails, boxing boots. With their staccato brass-blasts and jabbing, jousting fanfares, Dexys' songs actually *sounded* pugilistic. Rowland also liked the vaguely monastic quality of the boxers' hoods, which fit the music's "religious fervor, the real proud sort of staunchness of it."

Dexys took mod's sexlessness to a new dimension by separating the intensity of their beloved sixties soul from its original inspiration (carnal desire). Their passion was for passion itself. There was something decidedly ascetic about Dexys. In one song, Rowland declared, "I'm going to punish my body until I believe in my soul." Early on the group used amphetamines, which suppress sexual drive and can create messianic self-belief (Dexys very name came from "Dexedrine," the mods' favorite form of amphetamine). The group then switched to a more natural way of forging a collective sense of purpose, intense physical exercise (hence the athletic, hooded-top look). They worked out together and went running as a team. "It definitely helped the spirit of the group," Rowland recalled. "The togetherness of running along together just gets...that fighting spirit going. We used to come into the rehearsal rooms in Birmingham still sweating from running, and there was all these other groups there and it just put us a million miles away from them. You realize you have absolutely nothing in common with them. It isolated us a bit more, which is what we wanted at that point." Before gigs, the group would

limber up with exercises in the dressing room, Rowland chanting phrases from James Brown's "Sex Machine." Preshow drinking was verboten.

When Dexys hit the scene with "Dance Stance," they polarized public opinion. For a certain breed of young man, Rowland became an instant icon, a Mark E. Smith who'd grown up on Northern soul rather than Krautrock. Here was a working-class hero with a chip on both shoulders. Rowland was "searching for the young soul rebels," and these idealistic boys stepped forward as eager converts. Those of less fanatical disposition found Dexys ludicrous or repugnant. *NME*'s Mark Cordery critiqued the band's self-conception as "an elite of Pure and Dedicated men" in terms of "Emotional Fascism," and lambasted their music as a perversion of soul that, unlike its black sources, had "no tenderness, no sex, no wit, no laughter."

Dexys sternly dismissed pop as trivial and plastic. In one communiqué, they castigated the entirety of popular music as "shallow, conceited, foul tasting, non lasting, bubblegum." Yet in other respects Dexys were totally pop savvy. They understood the power of image, which they serially reinvented, à la Bowie, and were quick to grasp the importance of video. There was also something characteristically pop art and postmodern about the way Dexys used metamusical references. *Searching for the Young Soul Rebels*, the debut album, starts with the sound of a radio dial being turned, as someone scours the airwaves for the next in the line of working-class savior bands. There's a burst of the Pistols' "Holidays in the Sun," then a blare of the Specials' "Rat Race," before Rowland blurts, "For God's sake burn it down," and Dexys launch into their first song.

"Geno," Dexys' first number one single, was an homage to sixties mod hero Geno Washington. In his native United States, Washington was a second-division R&B talent, but in the U.K. he carved out a cult following. His high-octane performances fronting the Ram Jam Band appealed to the Dexedrine-gobbling mods. Rowland's older brother took him to see Washington when Kevin was only eleven. In "Geno," Rowland reminisces about the inspirational force of this first live-show experience, comparing Washington to the mod's pills of choice: "That man was my bombers, my Dexys, my high." The follow-up single, "There, There My Dear," went even further into the realm of metamusic. It's a vitriolic riposte to a skeptic called Robin (most likely a real person, a trend-hopping music journalist or pretentious musician) who's had the temerity *not* to "welcome the new soul vision."

Dexys did have some real content amid all the self-reflexive bluster. "There, There" also contains the classic class-war couplet "The only way to change things/Is to shoot men who arrange things." "I

Couldn't Help It If I Tried" recounts Rowland's attempt to organize a strike only to be let down by his coworkers. "Dance Stance" attacks people who tell jokes about stupid Irishmen but don't know about Oscar Wilde, Samuel Beckett, Brendan Behan, and the rest. The cover of *Searching* was a photo of a Belfast Catholic boy carrying his belongings after being driven from his neighborhood during the sectarian strife of 1969. Half-Irish, Rowland later recalled wanting "a picture of unrest. It could have been from anywhere but I was secretly glad that it was from Ireland."

Still, there was a suspicious vagueness to Rowland's rhetoric. Calling Dexys' fan club Intense Emotions Ltd. and titling one tour the Projected Passion Revue suggested both self-parody and a certain hollowness at the heart of it all. Their mission statement seemed to be "We have a mission," or even "We believe in the *idea* of having a mission." Asked what the album title *Searching for the Young Soul Rebels* actually meant, Rowland admitted, "I don't know. I just liked the sound of it, really."

Prickly at the best of times, Dexys' interviews in 1980 became fraught affairs as journalists probed for something tangible and Rowland got defensive. In July of that year, with "There, There My Dear" high in the charts, Dexys declared a press embargo, announcing that they'd no longer be doing interviews with "the dishonest, hippy press" but would instead pay for their own essays to be printed in the music papers as adverts. A series of pompous (if occasionally funny) communiqués followed, usually timed around the release of a single. The new embattled mood in the Dexys camp seemed to curdle the music, and this was reflected on the U.K. charts. "Plan B" was a small hit, but both "Keep It Part Two" and "Liars A to E" failed to chart at all. In early 1981, most of the band abandoned their leader to form a surrogate band called the Bureau. Only a year after topping the charts with "Geno," Rowland and his "new soul vision" looked all washed-up.

Too much too young also had a calamitous effect on 2-Tone. Talking to *Melody Maker* in June 1980, Jerry Dammers sounded despondent: "2-Tone has become a monster." Constant touring—including an exhausting trapeze across America—put a huge and intolerable strain on relations within the Specials. Running the label pushed Dammers, who didn't find it easy to delegate, to the point of collapse. While mixing the soundtrack for the 2-Tone live-performance movie *Dance Craze*, he had a work-induced breakdown. Meanwhile, a vast exploitation industry sprang up churning out shoddy merchandise. The back pages of the music papers teemed with ads for checked ties and badges, black-and-white modette suits, porkpie hats, and T-shirts featuring 2-Tone band and label logos. Not a penny of the

proceeds reached 2-Tone's coffers.

Ska revival clone bands swarmed across the nation. Most were unsuccessful, the exception being chart regulars Bad Manners, a comedy-ska troupe with a fatso front man called Buster Bloodvessel. Dammers accordingly felt the pressure to keep pushing things forward. "It's time for the 2-Tone bands to begin getting experimental," he declared. "Some of the homegrown ska has started to become a cliché. We've got to start all over again." For Dammers, this meant pursuing his fascination with mood music and easy listening, background stuff intended to be ignored, but that was actually quite eerie if actively listened to. According to Neville Staple, the obsession with Muzak came about because the Specials were playing abroad all the time. "We were in airplanes too much, man, and hotels! We were hearing that kind of elevator music, those drum machine beats, everywhere we went. You soak up what surrounds you."

In September 1980 the new Specials' sound was unveiled with the double A-sided single "Stereotypes" and "International Jet Set," both taken from the new album. "Stereotypes" whisked together a kitschedelic meringue of movie score and lounge music motifs—balalaikas and cossack choirs, mariachi trumpets and milky-sounding organ pulses—all gently propelled by the sibilant pitter of programmed drumbeats. The lyric revisited the leisure grindstone of "Nite Klub," but in a more wry and distanced fashion, caricaturing a young pisshead who "drinks his age in pints," drives while inebriated, and ends up "wrapped 'round a lamppost on Saturday night." "International Jet Set" was even more atmospheric. Laced with Casio-type rhumba rhythms and swirling Wurlitzer organs, it's a tale of frequent-flier paranoia, sung by Terry Hall in a high-pitched, high-strung whinny. To Hall, barely able to keep his panic in check, some jovial businessmen "seem so absurd to me/like well-dressed chimpanzees."

Brilliantly arranged, densely layered, and tricked out with witty embellishments, "Stereotypes" and "International Jet Set" were impossible to re-create onstage. The first album documented songs that had been honed through two years' worth of playing gigs. The record's live-in-the-studio vibe had even been criticized in some quarters for being underproduced. But the second album, *More Specials*, veered to the other extreme: The songs were largely composed in the studio, where Dammers had fallen in love with the mixing board, reveling in the possibilities it afforded for endless overdubs and perfectionistic fine-tuning. Not everyone in the band cared for this new production-and-arrangement-dominated approach. John Bradbury and Roddy Radiation both preferred high-energy

sounds (Northern soul and rockabilly, respectively). As a result, *More Specials* ended up something of a motley compromise, a mixed bag of revivalisms.

More Specials announced the end of the black-and-white 2-Tone aesthetic with its full-color cover, a blurry snapshot of the band relaxing. The music's sudden drop in energy left their porkpie-hatted audience bewildered. In truth, the Specials themselves seemed confused and dejected. "Do Nothing," the next single off the album, was oddly subdued and fatalistic, a down-tempo rocksteady number about a stylish layabout who meanders through his hometown, "trying to find a future," his only ray of sunshine being the new pair of shoes on his feet. The song seems to see right through the mod fantasy, its strategy of dressing well as a form of revenge on your social superiors. In a land where "nothing ever change," Hall sings, "fashion is/my only culture." But what happens, the song implicitly asks, when you stop believing in style as a magical solution, too?

To make matters worse, tensions had emerged that divided the band along class lines. "The thing about the working-class image that the Specials had when they started...well, I'm not working class, and neither is Horace," Dammers recalled. "We were trying to fit into something and eventually it became really tense." In the early months of 1981, rumors of a split circulated, but the band's finest hour was yet to come. In June they released the single "Ghost Town." Inspired equally by a trip to Kingston, Jamaica, and by witnessing the effect of Thatcher's policies on Coventry's economy and nightlife, "Ghost Town" sketches a sonic portrait of reindustrialization. The song starts with the desolate whistle of wind rustling through a deserted town. A wraithlike woodwind instrument drifts into earshot, soon joined by what sounds like a Wurlitzer playing in a long-derelict cinema. The lyric contrasts the gaiety of the good old days (the roaring nightlife back when workers had money to burn) with the present of idle factories and boarded-up nightclubs. "All the places we used to rehearse in and play our early gigs, they were shutting down," says Staple. At the end, "Ghost Town" cuts from Hall's exhausted sigh "can't go on no more" to Staple's baleful "people gettin' angry." Then the song strips down to just bass and drums as that eerie whistling sound returns, so chillingly cinematic you can almost see the wind-strewn bits of newspaper flapping along the streets.

"Ghost Town" turned out to be the most politically timely and momentous single since the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen." The single's three weeks at number one coincided with inner-city riots all across the U.K., verifying Staple's warning about "people gettin' angry." The two superb tracks on the flip side of "Ghost Town" made the whole record a kind of concept EP, representing three angles on

the British way of living death. Lynval Golding's "Why" addressed the racist thugs who'd attacked him outside the Moonlight Club the previous year, asking plaintively, "Did you really want to kill me?" before the more belligerent Staple steps forward to shout down the fascist British Movement: "You follow like sheep inna wolf's clothes." Wonderfully wan and listless, Terry Hall's "Friday Night, Saturday Morning" subverts the Easybeats' mod classic "Friday on My Mind," depicting a wage slave's dismal idea of big fun, which consists of sinking pints of lager at the discotheque while watching other people get lucky, then waiting in line for a taxi in the wee hours, clutching a meat pie in his hand, one foot planted in "someone else's spew," and wishing "I had lipstick on my collar instead of piss stains on my shoes."

The *Ghost Town* EP makes you wonder just how potent and unstoppable the Specials could have been if Dammers had allowed the other songwriting talent in the band to blossom. But it was too late. Golding, Hall, and Staple had been planning their departure for months before the EP's release. In late 1981 they announced the formation of a new group, Fun Boy Three, the name bitterly ironic, says Staple, "because when we came from the Specials, we were burnt out, it wasn't fun anymore." With the defection of Hall, Golding, and Staple, a crucial portion of the Specials' spirit seemed to have vanished. After the brilliant but commercially suicidal single "The Boiler" (a harrowing rape account recited by Rhoda Dakar of the Bodysnatchers, 2-Tone's all-girl group), Dammers produced a trilogy of protest singles—"Racist Friend," "War Crimes," and "Nelson Mandela," the sentiments of which were admirable but which lacked in musical execution almost everything that had made the Specials... special. Sapped by Dammers's ruinous passion for the recording process, the third album, *In the Studio*, underwent a two-year-long gestation (hence its wry title). Its sepia-toned soundtrack-for-a-nonexistent-movie songs felt sedate and sedative. The Fun Boy Three, meanwhile, scored a series of hits that were alternately glum—the Reagan/Thatcher-inspired "The Lunatics Have Taken Over the Asylum" and the world (affairs)–weary "The More I See the Less I Believe"—and jolly (two hit singles in partnership with the all-girl trio Bananarama). Then they, too, disintegrated.

By 1982, the original 2-Tone bands had all faded: The Beat had released an energy-sapped second album (aptly titled *Wha'ppen*), while the Selecter disappeared off the face of the Earth. Only Madness seemed to prosper and grow. Gradually they shed their nutty-boys image and became something of a modern-day Kinks, singing wistful songs about the dead ends and fleeting glories of life in England (or, more specifically, London). The only major ska revival group not

spawned in the West Midlands, Madness all hailed from the Camden/Chalk Farm/Primrose Hill area of North London. The sense of place, always present in their music (the cover of *Absolutely*, their second album, showed them outside Chalk Farm subway station), gradually intensified, climaxing with 1982's *The Rise and Fall*. Here Madness shouldered past the new-Kinks tag and lunged for new-Beatles status. The front cover of the gatefold sleeve was a *Magical Mystery Tour*-like tableau of the band atop Primrose Hill and garbed in semisurreal attire. Inside, "Our House" (their one real hit in the United States, where it cracked the Top 10) was Madness' "Penny Lane," bittersweet nostalgia for the familiar surroundings of childhood.

The group's McCartney figure, keyboard player Mike Barson, had always cowritten the majority of the songs and fulfilled a Dammers-like role as musical director. Like Dammers, Barson had gone to art college, although his interest was in commercial art and cartoons. "Commercial art" is actually a good tag for Madness' genius pop, but in truth *Rise and Fall* saw the group overreaching a tiny bit, retracing the historical path from mod into progressive art pop. For "Primrose Hill" (their "Strawberry Fields") they even hired progressive-rock arranger David Bedford to write brass-brand orchestration. After a few more Top 5 hits in the U.K., the group seemed to lose their knack, along with their sense of fun. Then in 1984 they made the disastrous decision to leave Stiff and found Jarzazz, their own foredoomed equivalent to the Beatles' Apple label.

As for Kevin Rowland and Dexys Midnight Runners, in 1982 they did something almost unprecedented. They became pop stars for a second time, and on an even bigger scale than before. Rowland's new "new soul vision" was heralded in March 1982 with "The Celtic Soul Brothers," a manifesto of a single that replaced the old Dexys' horn fanfares with the jaunty jangle of mandolins and roisterous, folksy violins supplied by the Emerald Express Fiddlers. Along with the new sound came a new Dexys image, of course, a rag-tag mixture of gypsy, rural Irish, and Steinbeckian Okie, with the group dressed in overalls, neckerchiefs, leather waistcoats, shawls, frayed jeans, and sweaters with big holes. "Celtic Soul Brothers" faltered on the edge of the Top 40, but the follow-up, "Come On Eileen," was a massive number one in the summer of '82, not just in Britain, but in America, too. Accompanied by an unexpectedly playful video, "Eileen" was an actual love song. Rowland archly admitted to having impure thoughts: "You in that dress/My thoughts I confess/Verge on dirty." Another big hit, a cover of "Jackie Wilson Said" by Van Morrison, acknowledged the new Dexys' heavy debts to the latter's "Caledonian Soul" sound of Irish folk-infused R&B.

The success of these singles and the album *Too-Rye-Ay* brought

Dexys a new middle-of-the-road audience of moms and dads and grannies, and this fucked with Rowland's head even more than his first encounter with fame circa "Geno." He felt like a sellout, a fraud. Rowland's response was the calculated career-suicide move of 1985's *Don't Stand Me Down*. Instead of rousing sing-along hit material in the "Eileen" mold, the album consisted of eleven-minute songs featuring bizarre comic dialogues, such as "This Is What She's Like," rants against the English upper classes, and metasoul exercises such as "The Occasional Flicker." On the front cover, Dexys made a final confounding image shift, appearing wearing ties, pin-striped suits, and neatly combed hair, looking for all the world like investment bankers in a photo for some corporate prospectus. "So clean and simple. It's a much more adult approach now," declared Rowland, rationalizing what in some senses was mod style logic taken to the ultimate limit: dressing like the ruling class.

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN A MOVEMENT and a fad, the ska resurgence only really lasted two or three years. But the 2-Tone adventure stands as one of the few examples in pop history of a revival that is not inferior to the music it's reviving. It may actually be *better* than the original sixties ska—more musically expansive, more resonant, and ultimately more defining of its own epoch.

"We are reviving something that never existed in the first place," Jerry Dammers declared, his insight pinpointing the creativity involved in 2-Tone's "secondhand culture." Where postpunk was resolutely modernist and obsessed with innovation, 2-Tone shared the postmodern sensibility of the New Pop movement that followed. Rather than meticulously re-creating a single, specific genre, 2-Tone sifted through pop's archives and mixed and matched elements of different styles—ska, Northern soul, easy listening, rockabilly—along with flavors from contemporary music such as disco and dub. postpunk bands rarely did cover songs, but 2-Tone signposted its sources and reference points with countless remakes and tributes—a citational compulsion shared by New Pop artists that sometimes took the form of wholesale interpolation of lyrics from classic pop singles.

2-Tone was cusp music, a transitional moment between postpunk and New Pop. Politically, 2-Tone had more in common with the postpunk groups, from its goal of independent-label autonomy (albeit propped up by major-label support) to its antiracist and anti-Thatcher politics, to the grim social realism of so many of its songs. But 2-Tone's emphasis on livening up the radio with dance energy and catchy accessibility looked ahead to New Pop. The Specials, Dexys,

and above all Madness were also early masters of the pop video. The 2-Tone movement's awareness of the importance of image and style, though monochrome, paved the way for the full-color explosion of New Popsters such as Adam Ant, the Human League, and ABC.

MALCOLM McLAREN, THE PIED PIPER OF PANTOMIME POP

IN THE SPRING OF 1979, Malcolm McLaren looked finished. His hopes of turning Sid Vicious into a global superstar were dashed when Sid died of an overdose on February 1. A week later, the court case John Lydon had mounted against McLaren to extricate himself from the latter's managerial clutches and recover the Sex Pistols' earnings resulted in the worst possible outcome. The two other surviving Pistols, guitarist Steve Jones and drummer Paul Cook, defected to the singer's side, and McLaren lost control of the band that had made him infamous. With his management company, Glitterbest, now administered by a court-appointed custodian, McLaren had to walk away from his beloved Pistols movie *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, leaving director Julien Temple in charge.

Swindle was McLaren's self-aggrandizing rewrite of recent history. The Pistols figured only as puppets with McLaren tugging the strings. Punk was portrayed not as a movement of working-class kids discovering their own power, but as a tour de force of cultural terrorism perpetrated by the arch-strategist McLaren according to a step-by-step master plan. But offscreen, the kids—Lydon, Jones, Cook—had finally wised up and kicked McLaren out of the picture. Exiling himself to Paris, McLaren licked his wounds and wondered what to do next. To tide him over, his friends at Barclay Records gave him the opportunity to put together soundtracks for some soft-core porn films using their vast library of African music as a resource.

The idea appealed to McLaren, who wasn't a feminist by any stretch of the imagination. His original choice for director of *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* had been porn auteur Russ Meyer, the Bresson of the breast, whose surreal soft-core movies had a cult following of trash aesthetes. McLaren teamed up with a pair of French screenwriters to write a "soft-core rock 'n' roll costume musical for kids" called *The Adventures of Melody, Lyric, and Tune*, which involved three fifteen-year-old girls and their sexual exploits with adults against the backdrop of various Parisian tourist landmarks. The blatantly pedophilic material scared away any potential backers, so McLaren and his collaborators penned another script, *The Mile High Club*, this time limiting the underage nookie to kids shagging other kids. A cross between *Lord of the Flies* and *Emmanuelle*, the screenplay concerned a tribe of teenage primitives who discover an abandoned jet formerly used by the Mile High Club (an organization dedicated to having sex while cruising above the clouds) and transform it into "a children's club for sex gang babies to make love."

While McLaren struggled to break into the porn world, the Sex

Pistols posthumously enjoyed a seemingly interminable run of chart success. Virgin released single after single from the *Swindle* soundtrack, which was released in February 1979, long before the movie was even finished. Cadaverous Sid Vicious got to number three twice in short succession with covers of Eddie Cochran's "Something Else" and "C'mon Everybody."

In his more paranoid moments, McLaren was convinced that Virgin boss Richard Branson had "out-swindled" him, nullifying the Pistols' threat through hippie-liberal tolerance. To his dismay, the record mogul had been prepared to go along with even the most offensive escapades McLaren proposed, including the desperate gambit of replacing Rotten as lead singer with escaped convict Ronnie Biggs of Great Train Robbery notoriety. After McLaren lost control of the band, Virgin surpassed even his cash-from-chaos cynicism. In the summer of 1979, Virgin released *Some Product: Carri On*, a hastily assembled album of Pistols radio interviews, complete with a cover depicting imaginary Pistols spin-off merchandise, such as "Fatty Jones" chocolate bars, a "Vicious Burger," and a Sid action figure complete with coffin. Later came the sick joke of *Flogging a Dead Horse*, a Pistols "greatest hits" album.

Virgin had blithely turned McLaren's punk critique of commodification into a commodity. As a good situationist, McLaren should have known all along that "the spectacle" could absorb any disruption, no matter how noxious, and convert it into profit. But this didn't stop him from trying to pull off exactly the same stunts and scandals with his next group. This time, though, he'd do it *right*. Others might have learned something from being sued by their clients (that people don't like being manipulated), but not Malcolm. The experience of losing control of the Pistols just made him more determined to find some truly pliable human material to work with next time. What he found was Bow Wow Wow.

AFTER FAILING TO GET HIS PORN musical off the ground, McLaren ended up halfheartedly managing a London band called Adam and the Antz. Adam was an ex-art-school punk who'd built up a devoted cult following with mildly kinky songs such as "Whip in My Valise" and "Beat My Guest." Despite scoring a number one independent chart hit with "Zerox" and appearing in Derek Jarman's punk movie *Jubilee*, Adam felt stalled in his career. Impatient to become a real star, he eventually coaxed McLaren, whom he revered, to provide some career guidance. For a flat fee of one thousand pounds McLaren shared the ideas percolating in his head about pop's "next big thing," and

developed a whole new image and lyrical approach for Adam.

McLaren astutely perceived that after punk there would be a return to swashbuckling glamour and heroic imagery as an inevitable backlash against punk's "no more heroes." Returning from Parisian exile, he'd discovered that his partner in couture, Vivienne Westwood, had been spending time down at the Victoria and Albert museum researching eighteenth-century fashions. Emboldened by McLaren's absence, she'd really found her own identity as a designer. "When Malcolm came back I think he got a bit of a shock," says Fred Vermorel, coauthor of the first biography of the Sex Pistols and an old art school comrade of McLaren's. "But seeing all the stuff that Vivienne had already done, he said, 'Why don't we hitch a band onto this look?' Because that's how it worked last time with the Pistols. Then Malcolm added his own touches. The pirates element came from him."

The other key components of McLaren's new pop vision were tribal rhythms and taboo-tweaking lyrics about teenage sexuality (as rehearsed in his abortive porn musicals). In Paris, McLaren heard African music for the first time. The city teemed with immigrants from former French colonies, and another old art school pal, Robin Scott (soon to score a worldwide smash with M's "Pop Muzik"), was dabbling with Burundi rhythms. McLaren hired Simon Jeffes, the classically trained musician who'd arranged the strings on Sid Vicious's "My Way," to teach the Antz the rudiments of African polyrhythm.

During his short period of involvement with Adam and the Antz, McLaren detected the germ of something special. Drummer Dave Barbarossa and bassist Lee Gorman developed a fresh, distinctive sound, all tumbling tom toms and frisky slap bass. Adam seemed like a star in waiting, but the singer also had a mind of his own, and McLaren flinched at the prospect of dealing with another Lydon. Sensing that the band would be far more malleable, he conspired with the Antz to fire their leader as 1979 drew to a close.

The Adam-less Antz had the sultry, exotic sound, and the fashion side of McLaren's would-be subculture was in place, courtesy of Westwood. All he needed now was a subversive angle, something to really goad the music industry and media. After getting involved in a TV series called *An Insider's Guide to the Music Business*, McLaren became interested in home taping, the industry's scapegoat for a sharp decline in record sales. Foreshadowing today's record industry panic about peer-to-peer file sharing, back in 1980 the big worry for music executives was that teenagers were taping music off the radio and copying each other's albums. McLaren, naturally, thought the ruination of the record industry was cause for celebration. He penned

lyrics praising cassette piracy and asked the ex-Antz to write Burundi-rumbling backing music. The plan was to use the song “C-30, C-60, C-90 Go!” as the TV series’ theme song, and end the program with the slogan “Music for life for free,” a poke in each eye for the record biz.

But *An Insider’s Guide to the Music Business* died in the development stages. Feeling a twinge of guilt for getting the band all fired up, McLaren finally committed himself to managing them. Now he had to find a new singer. A friend of McLaren’s discovered a fourteen-year-old Anglo-Burmese girl, Annabella Lwin, working part-time in a West Hampstead dry cleaner’s and singing along to Stevie Wonder on the radio. She eagerly agreed to join the band. Her mother, understandably concerned, was to prove a constant thorn in McLaren’s side, however.

McLaren threw himself into “training” the three male members of the group, now called Bow Wow Wow, with a nocturnal regime of whoring in Soho’s red-light district. McLaren put up the cash for the boys as part of his plan to systematically deprave them. Although reluctant—Barbarossa had a wife and baby—the hapless lads complied. Because the fourteen-year-old Annabella initially had problems fitting in with a bunch of men who were much older, McLaren even persuaded the guys that the problem was her virginity. To get her out from under her mother’s sway and make her commit to the group, one of them had to do the dirty and deflower the underage singer. Reluctantly, the band drew lots, and guitarist Matthew Ashman was dispatched to perform the task. He failed.

Gradually everything came together for McLaren. He was convinced that British youth, starved for ideas, would embrace his vision as an antidote to the gray postpunk and 2-Tone music of the day. Like punk, Bow Wow Wow was a patchwork of ideas plucked from history, topical issues of the day, and forward-looking elements that drew on McLaren’s knack for sniffing out an approaching trend on the cultural breeze. His “discovery” of African rhythm anticipated the vogue for world music by a good few years. When McLaren hailed Africa as the cradle of rock ‘n’ roll, his rhetoric prefigured the way ethnic music would be celebrated as a “raw” antidote to the overcooked and slickly synthetic pop of the eighties.

The other idea McLaren touted, a return to heroic glamour, was already happening in an emerging scene called New Romanticism at nightclubs such as Blitz. McLaren’s connecting pirate clothes with cassette piracy was a witty twist. But where he was truly farsighted was in predicting a massive transformation in the way people consumed music. Rather than reverently listening to albums at home, listeners in the eighties and beyond would increasingly use music as a functional soundtrack to other activities. In one interview, McLaren

described being rapt by the sight of “a tall elegant black man” sauntering down the street with a ghetto blaster on his shoulder (just like a pirate with a parrot), seemingly “oblivious to everybody else.” Sony’s Walkman—then called the Stowaway—had also arrived on the market. Sooner than just about everybody, McLaren grasped that the rise of portable playback technology would make music more omnipresent in people’s lives, but *less important*, and that it would eventually become mere disposable software for sleekly designed, highly fetishized pleasure-tech devices, such as today’s MP3 players and iPods.

Most of all, Bow Wow Wow was McLaren’s retaliation against postpunk. He found angst-wracked groups such as Joy Division drab and sexless. Postpunk was music for students, all atmosphere and mystique. A fan of fifties rock ’n’ roll, he felt that postpunk was progressive rock resurrected, with its albums that were solemnly treated as works of art, and that *looked* like works of art, what with their lavish, pretentious packaging. Above all, McLaren scorned the path taken by the former Johnny Rotten, saying “I don’t find [PiL] musical. And, if they’re not musical, I don’t care how experimental they are. He’s asking you to take a course in music before you understand it.”

Despite his own seven-year stint in art college, McLaren hated the new art school rock. The middle class had taken over rock once more, he complained. “They didn’t like punk because it was too hard and nasty, so they cleaned it up. They’ve used synthesizers because they think it’s smart and new: ‘Let’s experiment with music.’ Why do they take their lives so seriously? They’re so hung up,” McLaren despaired of the eighteen-year-olds, school-leavers too close to real-world economic pressures to really cut loose. He put his faith in thirteen-year-olds instead. This younger generation, unrestrained by any harsh reality principle, would rise up and “kick out that eighteen-year-old-university-graduate art school generation.”

McLaren also despised independent labels such as Rough Trade. He saw them as a new crypto-hippie aristocracy, politically correct but “poverty stricken in terms of imagination, street suss, and feeling.” By contrast, the old record biz giants such as EMI—who signed Bow Wow Wow despite the company’s troubled past relationship with the Pistols—seemed more trustworthy precisely because they had no countercultural pretensions. EMI-style conglomerates also had the gigantic marketing and distribution machinery that could make pop sensations happen in the most massive way possible. By comparison, the indie labels resembled small merchants, mere “grocers” as McLaren put it witheringly. This cunning sleight of rhetoric artfully connected Margaret Thatcher (“only a grocer’s daughter,” her

opponents jeered) to postpunk tradesmen such as Geoff Travis. Both were products of the same dreary English provincialism, Napoleon's "nation of shopkeepers." McLaren saw himself as a different kind of entrepreneur: not a petty bourgeois bean counter and ledger filler, but a dandy spendthrift, a cunning con man, a pirate upholding the grand British tradition of ransacking other cultures.

McLaren positioned Bow Wow Wow as a victory over Thatcherism. Rather than take the obvious postpunk path and bemoan mass unemployment, though, McLaren mischievously framed the absence of work as liberation rather than affliction. Bow Wow Wow's "W.O.R.K. (N.O. Nah NO! NO! My Daddy Don't)" declared, "Demolition of the work ethic takes us to the age of the primitive." Going to school was pointless, because its function (socializing youth for a life of labor) had been outmoded. "T.E.K. technology is DEMOLITION of DADDY/Is A.U.T. Autonomy" goes the chorus chant, taking the situationist fantasy of automation enabling a utopian future of perpetual play and updating it for the microchip era.

When asked by one interviewer about the plight of the unemployed, McLaren declared: "So what if you don't have a job? I came back to England and everybody looks like bank clerks to me. They look like they're very, very worried, about their future, about money. There's a greyness in the culture that's beating everyone down to a pulp. I think Thatcher really likes it that people are worried." McLaren's advice to the jobless was "Be a pirate. Wear gold and look like you don't *need* a job." Over endless coffee sessions in Soho greasy spoons, McLaren brainwashed Bow Wow Wow: "Don't be a grocer—a grocer's a money grabber, and he don't spend his money when he have it." If you had money, he believed, you should squander it. *Feeling* rich was the best way to beat Thatcher. Gold and sunshine were linked in his mind as un-English, the quintessence of spiritual extravagance. He fantasized, with endearing daftness, about importing sunshine, making the British Isles Mediterranean. "Just pretend it's the tropics" was his remedy for the Thatcher blues. Against the doom and gloom of politicized postpunk, McLaren imagined a kind of unshackled pleasure principle triumphing over economic reality through style and sheer insouciance. Again, McLaren was ahead of the curve. Wham! rode exactly this carefree attitude to fame a few years later, with the pro-dole "Wham Rap!" (essentially a rewrite of "W.O.R.K.") and the sunshine anthem "Club Tropicana."

McLaren felt certain that Bow Wow Wow would become the most important band since the Sex Pistols and consign dreary postpunk to history's garbage heap. But in July 1980, despite getting tons of press and radio play, the debut single, "C-30, C-60, C-90 Go!," stalled just outside the U.K. Top 30. Always the conspiracy theorist, McLaren

believed that EMI had bowed to covert pressure from the BPI, the organization that represented the record industry and was campaigning for a tax to be levied on blank cassettes as compensation for revenues lost to home taping. EMI, he believed, had sabotaged the single, falsifying its sales figures to ensure a low chart placing. Whipping up Bow Wow Wow into a fury, McLaren shepherded the group to EMI's headquarters, where they trashed a top executive's office, ripping gold discs from the wall and throwing a clock out the window.

AFTER GETTING KICKED OUT of his own band, Adam Ant wiped his eyes, decided success was the best revenge, and set to extracting his full money's worth from McLaren's image makeover. As a pop package, Bow Wow Wow was crammed with ideas to the point of incoherence. Basically apolitical, Adam boiled it all down to three key elements: heroic imagery, sex music, and tribalism. All had been part of his shtick already—the glam image, the kinky songs, the idea of his following as “antpeople”—but McLaren had given him a striking new look that mixed dashing pirate and Apache brave with a white stripe across the nose. As for the Burundi beat, Adam upped the ante on Bow Wow Wow by recruiting two drummers for maximum polyrhythmic impact. He also teamed up with his new guitarist Marco Pirroni to write a bunch of sharp, catchy tunes. Pirroni had contributed impressively heavy and dissonant guitar to the doomy postpunk outfit Rema Rema, but joining the Ants, he adopted a lighter, swashbuckling style that evoked Duane Eddy, surf music, and Ennio Morricone's spaghetti Western soundtracks. This sound also happened to be remarkably similar to the twangy, tremolo-heavy approach of Bow Wow Wow's guitarist, Matthew Ashman.

In the winter of 1980, the singles “Dog Eat Dog,” “Ant Music,” and “Kings of the Wild Frontier” smashed their way into the U.K. Top 10. For just a moment, there was a frisson of danger about Adam and the Ants. Sure, this was bubblegum pop. Yet Adam's sheer self-belief lent a weird sort of conviction to ostensibly ludicrous lines, like “Don't tread on an ant/He's done nothing to you/Might come a time/When he's treading on you” (which could be read as an oblique warning to McLaren and the former Antz now in Bow Wow Wow). On the cusp between culthood and stardom, the live Ants were an awesome experience. In some respects, Adam's whole tribal/heroic shtick was like a teenybop version of heavy metal's warrior-male fantasies. He also recalled glam gang leader Gary Glitter, another pop idol backed by two drummers stomping out a primal beat. Like Glitter, Adam's

peacock swagger was oddly asexual, more narcissistic display than real seduction.

During his early cult years, Adam had been endlessly mocked by the music press. Now he reveled in creating an army of look-alike followers. Even more delicious was the way that Adam used McLaren's own ideas more effectively than the mastermind himself. That winter, when Adam told *Sounds*, "I think 'cult' is just a safe word meaning 'loser.' I don't want it anymore," he was partly expounding the New Pop ethos of ambition and mainstream infiltration. But he was also sticking the knife into McLaren and the turncoat Antz. For all their manager's strenuous efforts, Bow Wow Wow remained a cult band, languishing in a hitless wilderness, whereas Adam and his new Ants were the pop sensation of 1980.

Adam's zenith came with "Prince Charming," his September 1981 U.K. chart topper and one of the strangest sounding hit singles ever. Its keening coyote-yowl melody resembled a Native American battle cry. The beat lurched disconcertingly, a waltz turning into an aboriginal courtship dance. In the video, Adam glided between a series of arrested poses, frozen tableaux of defiance and hauteur that weirdly anticipated "vogueing," the New York gay underground's form of competitive dancing inspired by photo spreads in fashion mags. At the end of the video, Adam impersonates a gallery of icons, including Rudolph Valentino, Alice Cooper, Clint Eastwood, and Marlon Brando. Both song and video expose a certain empty circularity to Adam's neoglam idea of reinventing yourself. He seems to be suggesting "imitate me as I've imitated *my* heroes." The chorus is oddly brittle and defensive ("ridicule/is nothing to be scared of") while the ultimate message—dressing up in fancy finery as a way of flaunting self-respect—feels distinctly trite.

"Prince Charming" ultimately suggested that Adam's destiny was to run through history's wardrobe until he ran out of heroic archetypes. He'd already been a highway robber with the previous number one single "Stand and Deliver." In the video for "Ant Rap," the next big hit from his *Prince Charming* album, Adam dressed up as a knight in shining armor. He ended 1981 with a spectacular, no-expense-spared tour called the Prince Charming Revue. The word "Revue" suggested that he'd moved into the realm of pure showbiz.

In interviews, Adam talked in vague terms about providing kids with hope, a positive alternative to "the rock rebellion rubbish." He claimed he was perfectly happy offering escapist entertainment à la *Star Wars* or *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and he defended his squeaky-clean image: "I'm sick and tired of being told that because I don't drink or smoke or take drugs that I'm a Goody Two-shoes.... I don't like drugs and that is a threat to the rock 'n' roll establishment." This

sentiment inspired Adam's next big hit—and his U.S. breakthrough—the rockabilly-flavored ditty “Goody Two Shoes.” The art school student who had hung around McLaren and Westwood's SEX and Seditionaries stores, where he was thrilled by the fetish clothing and images of the queen with a safety pin through her nose, now proudly performed at the Royal Variety Show, an annual charity event featuring Britain's top entertainers. “It would have been exactly the negative, inward-looking rock thing to have turned it down. If people think I'm clean and boring for shaking hands with the queen then that's up to them. What would be outrageous? To spit at her? Drop me trousers? That's rock 'n' roll rebellion and, like I say, I want nothing to do with that.”

WHILE ADAM TRANSFORMED HIS faux-deviant cult charisma into defanged mainstream fame, McLaren seemed to believe he could single-handedly conjure an entire subculture into being. Music alone was not enough. He and Westwood opened World's End, their latest King's Road boutique, to feature her new line of flouncy romantic clothes. McLaren also dreamed of making a movie with Bow Wow Wow, a second *Swindle* based around his new clutch of concepts. In the winter of 1980, he even attempted to start a magazine to promote the subversive sunshine-and-gold spirit embodied in Bow Wow Wow's music.

McLaren invited his old cohort Fred Vermorel to be the editor of the EMI-funded project. “The idea, as he first broached it, was something like *Schoolkids OZ*, a magazine written from the kids' point of view and a bit outrageous,” recalls Vermorel, referring to the special edition of the sixties underground paper that resulted in a high-profile obscenity case against the editors. *Playkids* was McLaren's original working title. He talked it up to the music press as “a junior *Playboy* for kids getting used to the idea that they needn't have careers...a magazine about pleasure technology for the primitive boy and girl.” Proposed articles included a piece by celebrity ex-convict John McVicar on crime as a career option in an age of rising unemployment, and an article by Bow Wow Wow's Lee Gorman about prostitutes, outlining where to go, prices, and so forth.

But Vermorel soon became anxious about some of McLaren's other ideas. Researching pop fandom for a book (later published as *Starlust*), Fred and his wife, Judy, unearthed lots of kinky fan letters, including one from a boy who worshipped Clem Burke from Blondie and dreamed of licking whipped cream from between the drummer's buttocks. McLaren wanted to publish the letter in *Playkids*, except that

now he wanted to call the magazine *Chicken*. “Call us naïve, but nobody, not me and not the people at EMI, knew what ‘chicken’ meant,” says Vermorel. “So we said okay. But of course it’s pedophile slang for young kids.”

Then there were the photo sessions. At one, Annabella was asked to pose nude (she refused). Another session was an all-day affair at a series of regular people’s homes, booked via an agency. “The photographer told me Malcolm got increasingly heavy-handed during the day and generated a kind of hysteria,” says Vermorel. The climax came with McLaren’s badgering a thirteen-year-old girl into removing her clothes. He succeeded, but only after reducing her to tears.

Vermorel believes McLaren’s master scheme was “to create a child porn scandal implicating as many people as he could.” Not just EMI, who was financing *Chicken*, but the BBC, too. A documentary crew headed by Alan Yentob had been following McLaren around for a program on the marketing of Bow Wow Wow. Partly impelled by his usual lust for maximum media mayhem, McLaren also wanted to make a serious polemical point, exposing pop music as porn *for* children (hypersexual material that stimulated them precociously) and pop as porn *using* children (fresh-faced boy-men, jailbait-age girls) to titillate adults.

With typical ruthlessness, McLaren, in his eagerness to embarrass the music and media establishment, showed no concern whatsoever about the youngsters (Annabella and the other teenage models) or old friends (Vermorel) who would have been embroiled in the scandal. When he went to remonstrate with McLaren, says Vermorel, “Malcolm just laughed and said, ‘You should be telling all this to the judge! When the shit hits the fan, I’ll be in South America.’ So I told EMI what was going on. And they told Yentob, and he freaked out, and those tapes have been in the BBC vault ever since.” Vermorel also alerted the music press, telling *NME* that the magazine he’d thought was supposed to be “the anti-*Smash Hits*,” aimed at sex-positive underage youth, was actually turning into “a magazine for adults that features kids as objects.”

McLaren accused his estranged friend Vermorel of being a closet puritan. But over the next few years, photos seeped out here and there on single sleeves and “greatest hits” compilations suggesting that the photo sessions had been decidedly dodgy. In one picture, Matthew Ashman wears just a “radio G-string” (a transistor-as-loincloth affair too small to conceal his genitals) and perches a scantily clad Indian boy who looks about eight years old atop his shoulders. In another photo, Annabella, apparently naked underneath a loosely wrapped blanket, lies on top of a studio mixing board with a microphone jutting at her mouth at a suggestive angle. “I wasn’t nude,” she

insisted later to *Sounds*, adding, with delicious lack of awareness, “I was lying on a control panel...with all these knobs sticking in me.”

Chicken never hatched. According to Vermorel, “the only physical evidence of *Chicken*’s existence was the rate card for advertising in the magazine.” But Bow Wow Wow’s second release, *Your Cassette Pet*, continued to exploit the underage-sex angle. Most of McLaren’s lyrics were reworked from the scripts for *The Adventures of Melody*, *Lyric*, and *Tune* and *The Mile High Club*. In “Sexy Eiffel Tower,” Annabella plays a suicidal girl about to leap from the top of Paris’s most famous landmark. She gets implausibly horny in the proximity of death: “Feel my treasure chest/Let’s have sex before I die/Be my special guest.” Plunging through the air (“falling legs around your spire”), she enjoys a *petit mort* or two before the *grand mort* of hitting the ground. Annabella claimed, with apparent sincerity, that the panting sounds she expertly imitated weren’t meant to be orgasmic but panicked. “Louis Quatorze” concerns a pervy bandit of love who surprises Annabella with unannounced visits and ravishment at gunpoint. The music, though, almost vanquishes any moral reservations: Bow Wow Wow had developed an exhilarating and unique sound, all frolicking polyrhythms, twangabilly guitar, and frantic but funky bass. Add Annabella’s girlish, euphoric vocals—especially charming on a cover of the Johnny Mercer standard “Fools Rush In”—and the results were irresistible.

Even more striking than its musical content, though, was *Your Cassette Pet*’s radical format. A cassette-only release midway in length between an EP and an album, it retailed at only two pounds and came in a flip-top carton similar to a cigarette pack. McLaren wanted music to become much more disposable, something kids casually picked up at the corner store as they breezed through on roller skates, mere software to pop into their portable cassette players and boom boxes. Traditional record shops, already ailing because of falling sales, would disappear, McLaren believed. EMI liked the idea of the cassette-only release for different reasons, ones that actually subverted McLaren’s subversive intentions. At the time, many years before tape-to-tape dubbing became widely available, cassettes were actually harder to copy than vinyl records. But a fatal flaw ruined the marketing plan. *Cassette Pet*’s tape sound quality was too poor for radio DJs to play, while the EP-or-album ambiguity confused many record stores and meant that *Cassette Pet* failed to penetrate the Top 40.

Subsequent singles such as “W.O.R.K.” and “Prince of Darkness”—both released on conventional vinyl—fared no better, and McLaren grew despondent. In the early Bow Wow Wow interviews, he’d argued that kids were famished for ideas. But no one was taking the bait. Gradually, it became apparent to everybody but McLaren that the

thing holding back Bow Wow Wow from success was the overbearing presence of their manager. Pop fans recoiled from the pungent odor of hype and the endless publicity stunts. The fact that *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* finally reached cinema screens around this time only exacerbated the impression of McLaren as über-Svengali.

McLaren had conned himself into believing his own retroactive myth of punk as a meticulously planned swindle. He imagined that he could dream up a subculture from scratch and the kids would simply fall in line. McLaren often pontificated in interviews about how punk had liberated kids' energy. But any flesh-and-blood youngsters who fell into his clutches were deceived and dominated. If they showed any signs of independent thought or unwillingness to sacrifice themselves on behalf of his ideas, they were discarded.

McLaren firmly believed in the "great man" theory of history, the idea that through sheer will the visionary genius can transform everything. This conception of change as a top-down process, with revolutionary ideas handed down from above, was profoundly antidemocratic and opposed to some of punk's core impulses, such as the do-it-yourself ethos. It also misrepresented McLaren's role and the real nature of his genius. During the whole Pistols adventure, McLaren actually operated as an improviser more than someone who had everything premeditated in detail. McLaren himself talked of his forte as being a *mis*manager, someone who at crucial moments simply wasn't there.

For their part, the Sex Pistols were more than mere cannon fodder for General McLaren's stratagems. As individuals they had substance, character, and their own ideas. Rotten, obviously, but also Steve Jones. A former petty thief, Jones's ability to not give a fuck (or give several "fucks" when required, as on the Bill Grundy TV show) contributed to the Pistols' volatile aura of chaos. In contrast, Bow Wow Wow were clearly marionettes twitching at McLaren's beck. Their early interviews featured McLaren doing most of the talking, and when you did hear from the group, they parroted the managerial line: "we're not synthetic and gray," "don't grocer it up." They couldn't lend McLaren's script any conviction or life. "Malcolm once said to me, *lamented* to me really, 'This lot don't seem to know what to do,'" recalls Vermorel. "Meaning that the Pistols always *did*. They were *naturally* delinquent."

Anybody with a real spark was sharp enough to wriggle out of McLaren's clutches. Boy George, for instance, briefly joined Bow Wow Wow, after McLaren convinced him that he should be a performer. Until then he'd been a sort of "it boy" on the New Romantic scene, a widely photographed poseur in clubs. Given the name Lieutenant Lush—a character from the *Mile High Club* script—George appeared with

Bow Wow Wow at a famous gig at the Rainbow, a venue McLaren filled with carousels and carnival rides to enhance the band's play-power image. Although he could see George's star quality, McLaren's main aim was making Annabella feel threatened and disposable in order to keep her in line. Eventually, George was kicked out of the band. "I got really pissed off and first of all I just wanted revenge," he told *NME*. Initially the plan was to rip off Bow Wow Wow's shtick and "be exactly like them but better." Then he decided to build something of his own, resulting in Culture Club.

McLaren's contrived controversies kept backfiring. Desperate to stir up some buzz for Bow Wow Wow's debut album, he designed its cover as a simulation of *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, the 1863 Édouard Manet painting denounced as "indecent" by Napoleon III for its image of a naked woman surrounded by fully clothed men. Annabella posed nude (under duress, she later confessed), but because she was still just under sixteen, her mother managed to stop the cover from being used. Another blow for McLaren came with the commercial failure of "Chihuahua," which was simultaneously Bow Wow Wow's most seductive single to date and their manager's most blatantly cynical gambit. Mouthing McLaren's words to a bittersweet Blondie-like melody, Annabella sang about being a "rock 'n' roll puppet," confessing, "I can't dance and I can't sing/I can't do anything," and warning, "I'm a horrible idiot/So don't fall in love with me." One could mount a defense of "Chihuahua" as a sly deconstruction of the pop industry's machinery of starlust and fantasy. But if one considers McLaren's genuine antifeminism, his real-world treatment of Annabella as meat (chicken, in fact), and the way he ventriloquized those humiliating words through Annabella's own lips, "Chihuahua" leaves a sour aftertaste.

Bow Wow Wow finally scored their U.K. pop breakthrough in early 1982 with "Go Wild in the Country," an antiurban fantasy featuring risqué lines about swinging naked from the trees and romping in fields "where snakes in the grass are absolutely free." With cassette piracy long discarded, Bow Wow Wow's new concept was getting back to nature, as in the hyperventilated album title *See Jungle! See Jungle! Go Join Your Gang Yeah! City All Over, Go Ape Crazy*. "Go Wild" exhorted youth to spurn McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken and go "hunting and fishing." On the sultry bossa nova "Hello Hello Daddy, I'll Sacrifice You," Annabella played the role of devouring earth mother as a coquette with a knife behind her back. The sweetly crooned lines about Woman being "more body than soul and more soul than mind" were vintage McLaren misogyny cobbled together from Lévi-Strauss, Jung, and *The Golden Bough*.

Despite McLaren's often questionable lyrics, *See Jungle!* was

charming and witty and altogether captivating, a pop masterpiece. Musically, the group had achieved a uniquely ravishing sonic identity. Naturally, this was *precisely* the moment McLaren finally lost all interest in Bow Wow Wow. According to Vermorel, the sixties art school milieu he and McLaren came up through regarded music as a lesser art form and held pop in especially low regard. McLaren always insisted—and still does, despite all evidence to the contrary—that the Pistols couldn't play and that punk had never been about the music. "Christ, if people bought the records for the music, this thing would have died a death long ago," he quipped in 1977.

By the time Bow Wow Wow scored their second U.K. Top 10 hit and American breakthrough with "I Want Candy," an exciting but vacuous remake of an old sixties bubblegum tune, McLaren had pretty much ceased managing the band. Bow Wow Wow, he finally understood, could never become popular on a mass-cultural level because of the inauthenticity gap, the fact that his ideas were being ventriloquized through a teenage girl. "Annabella wasn't me, so when it came to singing a song like 'W.O.R.K.,' it was very difficult for her to hold that up," he told *NME* in November 1982. But McLaren hadn't given up on pop as an arena for mischief making and mayhem. On the contrary, he'd just decided to give up on implementing his plans through surrogates such as Johnny Rotten or Annabella Lwin. Instead, it was finally time for McLaren to step up to the microphone himself. Curiously, though, he wouldn't sing into that mic, he'd *rap*. Well, kinda. The bizarre story of how Malcolm McLaren—a Jewish-Scottish ex-Svengali with no sense of rhythm—journeyed to the Bronx and not long after became the first white British MC to make the pop charts is something we'll return to.

MUTANT DISCO AND PUNK FUNK:

CROSSTOWN TRAFFIC IN EARLY EIGHTIES NEW YORK (AND BEYOND)

WHEN MALCOLM MCLAREN VENTURED deep into the Bronx to watch Afrika Bambaataa deejay in the summer of 1981, New York was at the height of the “mutant disco” phase—a glorious period of cultural miscegenation in which ideas from punk and funk, the downtown art scene and the far-uptown hip-hop scene, collided and cross-fertilized. Paralleling New Pop’s relationship with postpunk, mutant disco was at once an extension and a reversal of No Wave. It further developed the twisted funk impulse of DNA and Contortions into full-on danceability, but it also replaced No Wave’s aura of self-flagellating nihilism with a more hedonistic, playful sensibility.

No Wave had many things going for it, but “fun” wasn’t one of them. Entertainment, as most people define it, was not on the agenda. Instead, Lydia Lunch and James Chance staged a theater of cruelty, assaulting the audience with extreme noise, even physically brutalizing them now and then. At No Wave’s absolute height circa mid-1978, however, a group arrived on the New York scene with a vision about as far removed from Chance and Lunch’s “let the bad times roll” stance as you could imagine. From Athens, Georgia, the B-52’s were an almost instant sensation. At one of their earliest Manhattan shows, the group came onstage wearing 1950s girdles and beehive wigs (purple in the case of drummer Keith Strickland). After every chorus of the first song, they held a laugh box to the microphone. “They were the only band around with a sense of humor,” recalled scenester Animal X, who attended this show, in the downtown New York history *Art After Midnight*.

The B-52’s’ spirit was pure affirmation. Rejecting both punk and No Wave, Cindy Wilson—one of the group’s three vocalists—declared “I’m sick and tired of negative.” Heretically, in the New York context of the day, the B-52’s were a party band, their whole *raison d’être* being to get the audience to get down. No Wave had dabbled in funk, but in a curiously ungroovy way; Contortions’ and DNA’s fractured rhythms were more suited to having a fit than doing the frug. Mostly, the downtown hipsters just stood there, honing their blank gazes of affectless cool. “We’d get up in Max’s Kansas City and say, ‘OK, this is a dance song,’ and everybody’d be up there in their black leather coats just watching,” recalled B-52’s’ vocalist Fred Schneider of the group’s earliest shows, before their infectious music had fully thawed the vibe. “They were enjoying it, but it wasn’t cool to dance. Lord knows we didn’t look too cool.”

The fact that the B-52’s were two-fifths female and three-fifths gay

male gave their music a giggly, giddy, and diva-fabulous vibe that was totally different from No Wave (a prime example of “heterosexual modernism” at its most punishingly po-faced). On songs such as “Dance This Mess Around” and “52 Girls,” the sheer soul-roar blast of Kate Pierson’s and Cindy Wilson’s vocals created a kind of “camp sublime” effect, simultaneously schlocky and strangely ominous. “I’ll give you fish, I’ll give you candy,” pleads Wilson on “Give Me Back My Man,” lending the ludicrous lines a searing conviction. Schneider’s scrawny, squeaky voice, meanwhile, made for a neat contrast with the belting bombast of the bouffant she-B’s.

Tuneful, boppy, and videogenic thanks to their “pop art meets John Waters” image, the B-52’s were a homegrown counterpart to the Human League, albeit synth-free. It actually took the B-52’s over a decade to truly crack MTV (with 1989’s massive hit “Love Shack”), but they ought to have been sparring alongside the Limey likes of Culture Club right from the start. One reason they didn’t make it straightaway was that underneath the campy surface the B-52’s’ sound was stark and spiky, a tough dance groove midway between James Brown’s minimal Afro-funk and the Leeds agit-funk of Gang of Four and Delta5. When imports of the *Damaged Goods* EP and *Entertainment!* reached Athens, the sound struck a chord with the local art school bands (Athens being a university town, like Leeds). “*Entertainment!* was the soundtrack to every party in Athens before New York and L.A. found out about it,” former Athens art student Michael Stipe claimed. The B-52’s’ “Party Out of Bounds” is a kissing cousin of “At Home He Feels Like a Tourist,” all splintered rhythm guitar and unyielding bass pumping at exactly the intersection between rock and funk.

In every other respect, the B-52’s couldn’t have been further from *Entertainment!*’s seriousness. Their songs were largely inspired by entertainment, being suffused with that B-movie-fetishizing “Mondo” sensibility later canonized by the *Incredibly Strange Movies* books, and drawing inspiration from sixties dance crazes, comics and animated cartoons, and pulp sci-fi. Hence tunes such as “Planet Claire” and the marvelously goofy subaquatic fantasia of “Rock Lobster.” The latter was the band’s debut single in early 1978 via the Atlanta-based independent label DB Recs. It was rereleased in the summer of 1979 after the group signed to Island, and became a modest hit on both sides of the Atlantic.

Although Pierson and Schneider were originally from New Jersey, the B-52’s were shaped by the unique combination of liberal artsiness and down-home Southern laid-back vibe that characterized Athens. The band’s retro-kitsch image was hatched in the town’s numerous thrift stores and yard sales. “You could buy a shirt for twenty-five cents,” recalls Maureen McGinley, the band’s manager in the early

days. “What a lot of guys did is buy a week’s worth of shirts, all clean and pressed, on hangers, and wear ’em for a week, then take them back to the thrift store. It was cheaper than doing laundry.”

The B-52’s played their debut gig at a party in Athens on Valentine’s Day 1977. House parties thrown by students were the center of Athens’s music scene, otherwise very sleepy in terms of nightlife. “We had to make our own entertainment,” recalls McGinley. “When we threw parties I would hide my good pots and pans, because anything that was left out was going to be used as a drum before the night was over! The Athens scene was all about dancing. People didn’t stand around talking and making snide remarks. If an Athens band played and nobody danced, *they never played again.*”

Athens represented a more warmhearted and small-scale version of the art/music synergy going on in downtown New York. “Music was the least of it,” says McGinley. “There were people painting, writing, doing all kinds of things. When people came to the music they came to it usually through some other medium. Fred was a poet, for instance. As for Keith Strickland and Ricky Wilson, the guitarist, their *life* was their art. I had known Keith and Ricky since they were in high school. I vividly remember seeing them walking to school with lipstick on and their hair all done, holding hands. I was just like, ‘Oh these boys, they are not gonna make it.’ Because in Georgia back then, it was not at all cool to be gay. So we kind of all stayed together, in and out of each other’s house. It was a tightly knit group, and that came from not being accepted by the larger community.”

This extended family included Pylon, a bunch of art students who initially formed a band as a conceptualist jape—“a temporary-art idea,” as singer Vanessa Ellison explains. “We thought it would be fun to start a band, get written up in *New York Rocker*, then break up.” It all went pretty much according to plan—apart from the breaking up bit. No Wave journalist Glenn O’Brien rave-reviewed Pylon when they performed in New York, opening for Gang of Four, and praised the wiry dance rock of their first single, “Cool,” declaring that “they sound like they eat dub for breakfast.” Before they knew it, Pylon had a career on their hands, in no small part due to the support of their buddies, the B-52’s, who got them bookings at New York’s hot New Wave dance club Hurrah’s and even wangled Pylon onto the bill when the B-52’s supported Paul Simon in Central Park.

If the B-52’s had a spiritual second home in New York, it was at a place called Club 57, which was closer to a kooky arts lab than a nightclub. Indeed, the people behind Club 57—performance artists Ann Magnuson and John Sex, and painters Kenny Scharf and Keith Haring—have been described as a gang of B-52’s groupies. “We went to all [their] shows and gave the band presents,” Scharf recalled in an

East Village Eye interview, adding that Keith Haring “gave them plastic fruit once and they *loved* it.” The sensibility that united the B-52’s and the Club 57 clique was an ironic affection for American pop culture at its most grotesquely phony or over-the-top: majorettes and cheerleading troupes, Miss America, Liberace, pajama parties, beach movies, and the campy, misguided, B-movie/Las Vegas phases of Elvis Presley’s career.

Club 57 began as a spin-off of an event called the New Wave Vaudeville, whose cast of freaks included Klaus Nomi, briefly famous for his opera-meets-Kabuki performances. Taking up residence in the basement of a Polish church at 57 St. Marks Place, the club initially showed horror B movies such as *The Blob*. But soon the 57 crew started hosting elaborately designed theme parties that distilled a whole new sensibility from elements of pop art, drag, the trash aesthetic, and performance art. “I would create a set, a soundtrack, and a framework for people to come in and be their own characters, costume themselves,” says Ann Magnuson of theme nights such as *Name That Noise: Punk Rock Game Show*; *Lady Wrestling: Battle to the Death*; *Salute to NASA* (complete with simulated space flight); and *Brix Deluxe Barbecue Patio Partying*. “Once we started doing themes, I’d be going to thrift stores almost every day, getting costumes and props. There was also a lot of stuff on the street you could pick up, like refrigerator boxes. So we’d drag all this stuff back to the club and create, say, a Jamaican shantytown and make a putt-putt miniature golf course through it and play reggae. It was a conceptual art piece that you could be involved in.”

Scharf designed the Club 57 logo, a TV set with the word “fun” underneath the channel control dial. “I really saw Club 57 as an exorcism of Americana,” says Magnuson. “Because there were only three network channels of TV at that time, you watched all these old movies, and you’d pick up the sensibilities of vaudeville, the Marx Brothers, the *Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, horror films. All that stuff informed the art.” Beneath the camp delight, though, was a semiserious impulse to use mass culture’s tatty ephemera as a prism through which to view America’s political unconscious. As Kate Pierson from the B-52’s put it, “Without being too pretentious, you can look at a K-mart Shopping Center as a modern cultural museum and learn something from what’s there and what that means.”

Although music was just a small part of Club 57’s mix, the club did produce its own house band, an approximate equivalent to the B-52’s, in the all-girl ensemble Pulsallama. Formed as an offshoot of the Ladies Auxiliary of the Lower East Side (Magnuson’s parody of the Junior League), Pulsallama debuted at a slumber party theme night, hitting everything from cowbells and beer bottles to pots and pans.

“The thing about Pulsallama was that it was just an anti-band,” Ann Magnuson recalled, describing it as a parody of the hipster fad for tribal rhythms exemplified by bands like Bow Wow Wow. Pulsallama might have been a joke group, but few serious postpunkers made a record as strange and wonderful as their 1982 debut single, “The Devil Lives in My Husband’s Body,” a rolling and tumbling cavalcade of gamelan-style percussion, topped with a hilarious voice-over from a housewife whose seemingly possessed hubby has started making alarming bestial noises in the basement. “Our friends can’t come over anymore!” she wails.

Fueled by acid, mushrooms, and poppers, Club 57’s vibe was kitschedelic. It helped pave the way for the mainstreaming of camp and Mondo aesthetics that took place in the nineties and included Deelite, Nick at Night, *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, and the crossover success of John Waters’s films and Tim Burton movies like *Ed Wood* and the lamentable *Mars Attacks!* The Club 57 ethos was playful in both the childlike and theatrical senses of the word “play.” Artifice was celebrated and gender was treated as performative rather than innate.

Not everyone warmed to Magnuson and crew’s gleeful trashing of cool, though. “Esthetically I really hated Club 57,” downtown Renaissance man Jean-Michel Basquiat declared. “I thought it was silly. All this old and bad shit. I’d rather see something old and good.” Magnuson attributes the dis to Basquiat’s sense of competition with fellow artists Scharf and Haring. Basquiat was also associated with the Mudd Club, 57’s big rival during this period.

In some ways the two clubs had a lot in common. The Mudd’s founder, Steve Maas, threw lavishly styled theme parties, too, and there was also a connection with the B-52’s, whom Maas says were the first band to ever play at Mudd. Fred Schneider even helped organize a cheesy Hawaiian tiki theme night. Despite the overlap, though, the two clubs soon developed totally different vibes. Magnuson characterizes it as a difference in emotional temperature—57 was “groovy,” the Mudd “cool.” In many ways the Mudd was the continuation of James Chance-style No Wave decadence (indeed, Anya Philips, Chance’s manager/lover, was involved in the Mudd’s conception before she had a falling-out with Maas). In *Art After Midnight*, the description of the Mudd’s atmosphere by scenester Carmel Johnson-Schmidt resembles a Contortions lyric brought to life. According to Johnson-Schmidt, it felt like “everything was false, that nothing mattered, and that nothing was going to last. People gave up on planning things. It was all for that moment, that night. People barely even fucked.” Instead of hallucinogens, the drugs of choice at the Mudd were alcohol, downers such as Quaaludes, and, for some,

heroin.

Using money from his father's business, Steve Maas sponsored a club that was less like a discotheque or rock venue than a bohemian salon and performance art space. "In the rock business, you need a very strong brand identity, but the Mudd was the complete opposite of that," Maas says. "We had this incredibly diversified program. One day we'd do some avant-garde composer and the next it would be the Plasmatics." Upstairs, the Mudd even had a late-night art gallery featuring shows by downtown artists. "Robert Christgau described the Mudd as the citadel of dilettantism," laughs Maas.

Before focusing on the Mudd, Maas was something of a dilettante himself, flitting from studying philosophy and art history to autodidactically undertaking explorations of anthropology to dabbling with avant-garde filmmaking. When punk rolled around, Maas threw himself into documenting the scene almost like an ethnomusicologist, shooting 16 mm footage of bands such as the Dead Boys. He then attempted to make a documentary with Diego Cortez and Anya Philips, No Wave scenesters who first broached the idea of starting a "punk discotheque" as downtown's riposte to Studio 54. Maas launched the club in the only area he could afford, an industrial zone of Chinatown where virtually no one lived. Following the anti-Studio 54 concept, the Mudd's decor was spartan and glitz-free. Instead of a velvet rope out front, it famously had a metal chain. Maas used the cheapest materials he could find at the discount stores on Canal Street and decorated the bar with air maps. "I had a pilot's license and I took all these maps and coated them with plastic."

The Mudd Club's equivalent to Ann Magnuson was a magnetic blond beauty called Tina L'Hotsky who organized many of the most celebrated theme nights. L'Hotsky's tour de force was the *Rock 'n' Roll Funeral*, a tribute to dead stars such as Jimi Hendrix, Sid Vicious, and Jim Morrison. Maas paid for real hearses, coffins, and floral wreathes. "I'm not sure Steve made that much money from the Mudd in the end because he would spend more on parties than he could ever make back," says writer Gary Indiana, in those days a Mudd mainstay who infamously organized a benefit for *himself* at the club.

Another lavishly appointed theme night was the *Soul Party*, a massive installation organized by Michael Holman, a friend of Basquiat's. "Upstairs we had a soul kitchen with all this food from Sylvia's Kitchen, black-eyed peas and candied yams. In the back was a pimp's bedroom with plastic love beads, mirrored ceilings, and a giant bed with orange fur pile. We had a beauty parlor with hairdryer chairs from a Brooklyn parlor. Downstairs I was deejaying, playing all this late-sixties/early-seventies funk music that most people at the Mudd had never heard."

Holman and Basquiat were both in an art noise outfit called Gray. Although No Wave was fading and the more groovy sounds of punk funk and mutant disco were taking over, artists still believed that rock music was the hot spot of the culture, not to mention the quickest route to finding fame, fortune, and artistic impact. So future filmmaker Jim Jarmusch, for instance, fronted a moody, atmospheric outfit called the Del/Byzanteens, while actor/director Vincent Gallo was briefly a member of Gray and made ethereal lo-fi sound collages on his own. As for Basquiat, he was starting to get media attention for the omnipresent SAMO graffiti he did with Al Diaz, but he also felt the pull of music.

Gray is virtually undocumented in terms of recordings, the sole exception being the lengthy instrumental “Drum Mode,” which was resurrected on the 2002 compilation *Anti NY*. It’s a shame, because “Drum Mode,” all stealthy, twilight-zone percussion and weird noise tendrils, suggests that Gray were a remarkable group. Recalling his postpunk dabblings for the *New York Times*, Basquiat talked about being inspired by John Cage and the idea of “music that isn’t really music. We were trying to be incomplete, abrasive, oddly beautiful.” According to Holman, Gray evolved into “a sound-noise thing, like you were in a factory and the machines would turn themselves on and try to make music when the humans went home.” Basquiat himself played “a fucked-up little toy synth with colored keys through some effects boxes,” recalls Richard McGuire of the legendary punk-funk band Liquid Liquid, who shared a few bills with Gray.

Gray’s most celebrated moment occurred at the Mudd Club in 1979. “I decided I wanted to do this crazy geodesic dome,” recalls Holman. “I went to the Bronx and rented one hundred dollars’ worth of scaffolding.” Holman placed the other members of Gray—Gallo, Nick Taylor, and Wayne Clifford—so that they juttied out of the dome in disconcerting fashion. “Vince and Wayne were four feet off the ground, strapped in at forty-five-degree angles with their keyboards. Nick was so high up in the scaffolding that through the whole set all you could see was his feet. My head popped up from the surface of the stage.” After hours of preparation, Basquiat finally deigned to turn up for the sound check. “Jean doesn’t say a word, just turns around and leaves. I’m thinking: ‘Oh my God, is he coming back?’ Jean comes back in under five minutes with this crate he found in the garbage and throws it onstage. And then, like a mummy in an urnlike sarcophagus, he scrunches his body into this three-foot cube thing and stuffs the synth in with him. And he looks at me and smiles. It was like, you could spend forever making something happen and he’d blow it away with one gesture!”

After Gray faded away, Basquiat left one more faint footprint on

music history with his role as producer and arranger on 1983's "Beat Bop," a cult classic of avant-garde hip-hop by a visionary (or possibly just deranged) MC called Rammelzee. Basquiat was a key facilitator in the three-way connection that formed between the post-No Wave scene, the SoHo art world, and the nascent hip-hop culture of the South Bronx. But it was actually Holman, in tandem with graffiti artist Fab Five Freddy, who organized the Canal Zone party of April 1979, the event that introduced graffiti to the downtown art scene. A snapshot of this glorious era of New York crosstown traffic circulated around the world in the form of Blondie's graffiti-decorated video for the hit single "Rapture," in which Basquiat and Fab Five Freddy make cameo appearances. The song also features Debbie Harry's endearingly dire attempt at rapping, making her quite possibly the first white MC on the pop charts.

Border crossing and musical hybridity were the name of the game at ZE, the New York label that trailblazed the shift from No Wave's sadomasochistic aesthetic to the more subtle subversions of mutant disco. Writer and downtown New York scenester Luc Sante succinctly and accurately defines the genre's "potent formula" as "*anything at all* + disco bottom." It's not clear who coined the term "mutant disco," but it first appeared as the title of a celebrated 1981 compilation that introduced ZE to many listeners. In his *Mutant Disco* liner notes, *NME*'s Ian Penman hailed ZE for its genre bending and genre blending. "Most music you're likely to find turning around a ZE label will either be edging towards an idiom of its own—if it isn't already there—or in the process of wrecking the one you might be tempted to wrap it up in."

Alongside the James White and the Blacks project, ZE's first full-blown foray into mutant disco was Cristina. She was actually ZE cofounder Michael Zilkha's girlfriend (the pair had met at the *Village Voice*, where they'd both written theater reviews), and his concept was to turn her into a sort of highbrow disco diva with urbanely witty lyrics dripping with James Chance-style dead-hearted cynicism. "Disco Clone," Cristina's first single, was a gorgeously orchestrated satire of the discotheque as meat market, featuring a cameo performance from Kevin Kline (then a Broadway star) as a polyester-clad Lothario. Her finest moments, though, came with a cover of Leiber and Stoller's "Is That All There Is?" (with added lyrics about S&M and Quaaludes for extra jadedness) and the genuinely harrowing "Things Fall Apart."

Cristina's self-titled debut album was produced and mostly written by August Darnell, who came from outside the whole postpunk scene. As the lyricist in his brother's group, Dr. Buzzard's Original Savannah Band, he'd tried to bring to disco the sort of sophisticated panache last seen in popular music during the forties and fifties. A fan of

Hollywood musicals, Darnell saw each Savannah Band song as “a mini-screenplay.” But despite critical plaudits for their 1976 debut, *Dr. Buzzard’s Original Savannah Band*, the band never made it, partly because they had way too many clever ideas for the disco market, and partly, says Zilkha, because “it all imploded when [August’s] brother Stony went off into a drug-induced haze.” Taking full control of the reins as bandleader and front man of a new group called Kid Creole and the Coconuts, Darnell, still dreaming of getting his songs on Broadway, renovated the 1940s big-band sound for the multicultural eighties, blending sundry sultry rhythms (salsa, calypso, rumba, reggae, funk) with witty lyrics that flashed back to a lost golden age of quality songwriting, but whose topics (like impotence, in “Mr. Softee”) had a thoroughly modern edge.

Critics on both sides of the Atlantic hailed Darnell’s resurrection of the bygone art of the torch song, as heard on a pair of Kid Creole albums released by ZE, *Off the Coast of Me* and *Fresh Fruit in Foreign Places*. They also dug his creed of “creole” music. “Creole is the combination of French and blacks in New Orleans,” Darnell explained. “I use it as a beautiful symbol of the amalgamation of different cultures musically.” Darnell told *NME* that he’d developed this notion of musical miscegenation thanks to his brother. “Blacks had their ‘Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud,’ whites had their movement of the superior race, so Stony said Mulattos should be proud of being half-breeds. They should stand on a pedestal and say, ‘Hey, I’m the best of both worlds.’”

Musically vivacious, Kid Creole’s lyrical heart was often distinctly dark, much like Was (Not Was), ZE’s other great exponent of dance music with a noir twist. Don Was and David Was (who are not actually brothers—their real names are Don Fagenson and David Weiss) cited Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco (pioneer of the Theater of the Absurd) as influences, along with the Marx Brothers. Their version of mutant disco came freighted with “postacid disillusionment,” as Zilkha put it. Originally from Detroit, the duo had participated in the whole sixties adventure, involving themselves in guerrilla theater and the White Panther movement. Written by David Was, a former rock critic, the lyrics emerged barbed and bleak, with songs such as “Out Come the Freaks” attuned to the savage ironies and grotesqueries of post-Nixon America. “Tell Me That I’m Dreaming” was a roiling funk tune that performed a cheeky cut-and-splice job on a Ronald Reagan speech, making the president confess, “Can we who man the ship of state...deny...it is somewhat out of control?” “Wheel Me Out” and “Oh, Mr. Friction” sounded like paranoid schizophrenia remixed for dance floor action. Musically, too, Was (Not Was) carried traces of late-sixties Detroit, their fusion of hard funk, hard rock, and

harsh jazz recalling Funkadelic and MC5 (whose Wayne Kramer played shrieking guitar on “Wheel Me Out”). “If it sounds like we’re not slaves to a certain style, it’s because Detroit is such a style salad,” David Was explained. “We grew up on the best of black and white, you could get it any which way you liked. So we couldn’t just make a formula record, what fun would that be?”

A similar soundclash of seeming opposites resulted in the electrifying “Bustin’ Out” by Material. Before hooking up with ZE, the band—bassist Bill Laswell, synth player Michael Beinhorn, and drummer Fred Maher—had been a progressive-fusion outfit, funky but abstruse. Zilkha managed to extract the best record of Material’s lengthy career by imposing a strict concept. “With ‘Bustin’ Out,’ I wanted them to make a record with a disco beat and be as strange as they wanted on top,” he recalls. At Zilkha’s request, Material slathered squealing heavy-metal guitar all over the song’s electrodisco groove, anticipating the rock/funk fusion of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It.” For lyrics, the group used the prison letters of Black Panther George Jackson and got fiery-voiced R&B diva Nona Hendryx to sing the words. “Material delivered exactly what I’d wanted,” says Zilkha. “‘Bustin’ Out’ was a cynical, manufactured record. But not really—I believed that was what we *should* be making.”

Material and Was (Not Was) fit ZE’s philosophy, which was based on confusion in the etymological sense—bringing things together that were normally kept strictly separate. ZE and its bands defied rockbiz norms of predictable brand and band identity. As Penman wrote in his *Mutant Disco* sleeve notes, “at any given point any number of nameless or famous people could be involved in a Material or Was (Not Was) song.” But inevitably this led to confusion in the consumer retail sense. Apart from Kid Creole’s brief success in the U.K., none of ZE’s acts made it in the huge mainstream way Zilkha envisioned. “All of my bands were *too clever*, and it took me ages to understand that ‘clever’ isn’t necessarily it,” he says ruefully. “Truly great rock music is not clever. Don’t get me wrong, I love all my records, but they’re not elemental like Joy Division or Neil Young. I could create the illusion of elemental-ness with very loud guitars, like on ‘Wheel Me Out’ or ‘Bustin’ Out,’ but it was ultimately an illusion.”

When it came to labels that defined New York’s mutant disco scene, ZE’s only real rival was 99 Records. Equally rooted in border-crossing blends of white and black music, but less opulently produced, the 99 sound was more punk funk than mutant disco. Run by Ed Bahlman, the label began in time-honored indie fashion as an offshoot of a record store. 99 had its greatest success with records by Liquid Liquid and ESG, whose skeletal funk came to define the label, but Bahlman had a bunch of quirky lesser-knowns on the roster, too. The

all-girl Y Pants played dinky music based mostly around toy piano and ukulele. One member of the trio was Barbara Ess, whose boyfriend, Glenn Branca, put out a couple of his early works via 99.

Closest to the sound of ESG and Liquid Liquid were the Bush Tetras, the band Pat Place formed after quitting Contortions. Like an American Au Pairs, their pared-to-the-bone rock funk expressed an assertive autonomy. The group's mostly female lineup and shorthaired, unisex image convinced many they were lesbians, although Place told *NME*, "personally I think our music, our lyrics, are in a way sexless." Indeed Bush Tetras' big anthem, "Too Many Creeps," was about fending off unwelcome attention, wanting to be left alone. Bassist Laura Kennedy quipped that the band's style was "rhythm and paranoia."

99 Records also licensed "Launderette/Private Armies," the solo single by U.K. music journalist Vivien Goldman. The record was something of a postpunk-all-star affair, featuring Keith Levene on guitar and bass, violin from the Raincoats' Vicky Aspinall, LMC's Steve Beresford on toy piano, and dub wizard Adrian Sherwood at the mixing board. John Lydon was credited as coproducer, but really played a background role as vibe setter and benefactor (the single was recorded during studio downtime donated by PiL).

Initially, 99 had something of an Anglophile slant. Bahlman ran the store with his British girlfriend, Gina Franklyn. Located at 99 MacDougal Street in Greenwich Village, the belowground-level store doubled as a clothes boutique. Franklyn would return from trips to London with cool garments and boxes of Rough Trade-type postpunk records. On one occasion, she and Bahlman lugged huge cartons of *Metal Box* across the Atlantic in order to be the first store in New York to stock the import of PiL's classic album. 99 even formed a partnership with Factory Records to jointly release the debut EP by ESG, a female group of ultraminimal funkateers from the Bronx whom Bahlman had discovered when he was serving as the judge at a talent show. He became the band's manager and booked them as the opening act for U.K. postpunkers such as Gang of Four, PiL, and A Certain Ratio. McGuire recalls ESG's September 1980 show at Hurrah's supporting ACR as "mind-blowing. The songs were held together by nothing—a couple of clacking sticks and a simple bassline!"

Factory's Tony Wilson, also in the audience, was equally impressed and invited ESG to make a record for him. As it happened, Wilson had some studio time available, again thanks to ACR, who'd come to New York to record their debut album, *To Each...*, only to finish three days ahead of schedule. With Martin Hannett producing, the session yielded the classic ESG tracks "You're No Good," "UFO," and above all

“Moody,” whose oxymoronic blend of cold and sultry made it a foundation track for the house music scene. Ironically, ACR’s own experience with Hannett was disastrous. “He took a lot of the funkiness out by making Donald Johnson record every part of the drum kit separately,” says guitarist Martin Moscrop. As a result, when *To Each...* came out it was panned, while ESG’s 99/Factory EP, released in early 1981, received rave reviews, with the girls being hailed as “a cross between Public Image and Tamla Motown.”

ESG’s odd mixture of emaciated minimalism and raw soul, their hard-funk basslines and chittering percussion, totally fit postpunk notions of what dance music should be. Yet as McGuire recalls, ESG “were from a different planet.” An all-girl family band from the South Bronx, the Scroggins sisters were often mistaken for Puerto Rican, but were actually the children of a white father and a black mother. The latter had originally bought the girls instruments when they were very young (Deborah Scroggins started playing bass around age eight) as a ruse to stop the kids from hanging out on the streets and getting into trouble. “I always felt that ESG didn’t know what they had gotten themselves into,” McGuire says. “They were all so young playing these rock clubs and they couldn’t even drink. I remember Liquid driving down to do a show in Washington, D.C., with ESG, the girls’ mom coming along. She made sandwiches for everyone and it was like a family outing!”

In one early interview, Renee Scroggins described the ESG sound as “punk funk,” but she wasn’t referring to Gang of Four so much as Rick James, who used that term to describe *his* music. In those days, ESG did have common ground with the English agit-funkers, though, in that they weren’t crazy about the slickly orchestrated black dance music of the late seventies—such as Earth, Wind and Fire’s *I Am* or Michael Jackson’s *Off the Wall*—but instead harked back to the sinewy, stripped-down funk of the first half of the decade. James Brown was a particular favorite. “It was the funkier music I could ever hear, especially when [JB] would go to the bridge and let the funk rip,” Renee Scroggins told *Tuba Frenzy*. “So I felt that he would always make that little funky space too short. You know, the part that made you want to really dance and get down? I wanted to hear something like that but let that funky space ride!”

That same desire to isolate the most invigorating section of a funk or disco record was what gave birth to hip-hop in the late ’70s. Known as “breaks,” these stripped-down, percussive parts would be extended by DJs by cutting back and forth between two copies of the same record. Break beats would become the rhythmic foundation for rap music. It was weirdly fitting, then, that ESG would themselves end up heavily sampled by rap producers, with “UFO” in particular appearing

on numerous tracks, most famously the Marley Marl-produced “Ain’t No Half Steppin’” by Big Daddy Kane. Indeed, ESG were as much an organic product of the South Bronx as hip-hop. “The Bronx can give you a lot of musical feeling because there’s so much stuff going on out there,” observed Renee Scroggins. “It has a lot of savage drive, with the drumbeats and all. The whole summer long, all you hear from sunrise to sunset is congas in the park back there. It can drive you crazy.”

Liquid Liquid was shaped by similar environmental sounds. “The Lower East Side of Manhattan was very Hispanic and you heard this Latin stuff all the time coming out of every bodega,” says McGuire. “All of our cowbell and conga sounds were coming from being exposed to that.” The group had begun as the punkier-sounding Liquid Idiot, but a Pop Group-like ritualistic element gradually filtered into the music. The band’s posters encouraged people to come to shows with things to bang on. “Some gigs got really tribal. It was mostly improv, just chaotic, broken beer bottles everywhere.” After various lineup changes, the band’s sound became steadily more percussive as they absorbed the influence of Fela Kuti, reggae, and gamelan, and they decided to change the group’s name to Liquid Liquid because it “suggested a slippery grooviness.”

Liquid Liquid released a series of EPs on 99, but they are mostly remembered for one track, “Cavern,” which was heisted hook, (bass) line, and sinker by Grandmaster Flash for the 1983 rap hit “White Lines (Don’t Don’t Do It).” Released earlier that year on Liquid’s *Optimo* EP, “Cavern” received a substantial amount of play on New York’s black radio stations, and copies were flying out of the 99 record store. Then, suddenly, it disappeared from rotation, only to be shortly replaced by “White Lines.” McGuire remains ambivalent, feeling both exploited and honored that one of his heroes liked the band’s work so much he’d rip it off.

Liquid Liquid’s music was also embraced by a different black scene, the mostly gay black and Hispanic dancers at clubs such as Paradise Garage. This was disco culture going underground again after its mainstream overexposure circa *Saturday Night Fever*. McGuire recalls performing at the Garage a few times and hand-delivering a copy of Liquid’s latest EP to the resident DJ god, Larry Levan. “The Garage was an insane place. It really was a big parking garage that was turned into a disco. When we played, they had us do three songs, then get offstage. This was typical for all these big dance places we played, like the Funhouse, or the Roxy. It was so much more about the DJ.”

A new form of postdisco dance music was coming out of New York on labels such as West End, Prelude, and Sleeping Bag, with less

emphasis on live musicianship and more use of technology—drum machines, synth bass, and production soaked with dub-style echo. As McGuire noted, the DJ ruled, not just in the booth at the club, but in the recording studio, too. Auteur figures such as Levan, Walter Gibbons, Shep Pettibone, and Francois Kevorkian became famous for their remixes and production work and, in Pettibone's case, for extended dance mixes on New York radio that seamlessly segued multiple tracks.

Two New York figures, Grace Jones and Arthur Russell, bridged the gap between the gay postdisco scene and the largely straight world of postpunk. Russell almost joined Talking Heads early on. His background, however, was decidedly nonrock. A gay avant-garde musician with hippie-mystic tendencies, Russell fell in love with disco at the New York club, the Gallery. Literally entranced by disco's use of repetition, he spotted the parallels between the DJs' endless, unbroken mixes and the minimalist compositions of Terry Riley and Steve Reich. Russell cofounded the label Sleeping Bag and started recording surreal art disco tracks such as "Go Bang #5" (under the name Dinosaur L) and "In the Light of the Miracle," often collaborating with New York's leading DJ remixers.

Grace Jones was a Jamaican expatriate turned fashion model turned disco diva, whose career stalled when disco fever cooled. She regained her momentum when Island Records hooked her up with legendary reggae rhythm section Sly and Robbie, and a coterie of players, writers, and engineers based around Compass Point Studios in Nassau, to create 1980's *Warm Leatherette*. On the surface, the record's midtempo dub-funk grooves and slick musicianship would seem to have little in common with postpunk, if not for the judicious choice of cover tunes: the title track by the Normal, Joy Division's "She's Lost Control," and the Pretenders' "Private Life," a brutally unsentimental song in which a woman cuts loose a clinging man with harsh kiss-off lines such as "Attachment? Obligation? That's so wet!" Jones's next album, *Nightclubbing*, which featured similar treatments of songs written by Iggy Pop and Sting (the title track and "Demolition Man," respectively) alongside bewitching originals such as "Pull Up to the Bumper," "Feel Up," and "Walking in the Rain," was voted 1981's album of the year by the critics at *NME*. Jones's imperious voice, striking image (a mixture of Amazon, cyborg, and dominatrix), and performance-art-like *One Man Show* made her a signifier banquet for the semioticians of the rock press and style magazines.

At one point, the music papers excitedly reported that Grace Jones was set to work with A Certain Ratio on a cover of Talking Heads' "Houses in Motion." According to ACR's Moscrop, two backing tracks were laid down by the band with Martin Hannett producing, and

Jones “came down to listen to them. The plan was actually to record an entire album in the Bahamas with Grace.” The idea was ultimately quashed but serves as an apt symbol for the burgeoning love affair between Factory Records and Manhattan. After living in Tribeca for a couple of months while recording their debut album, ACR became besotted with the city. They even acquired an American vocalist, Martha Tilson, who gradually eclipsed their original singer, Simon Topping. He’d lost confidence in his vocals and instead took lessons in hand percussion, an obsession ACR developed from watching Puerto Ricans playing congas in Central Park.

New Order likewise fell head over heels for New York, and their music gradually assimilated its various dance floor sounds, including postdisco; the brash, synthetic style known as Latin freestyle; and electro, a hip-hop subgenre heavily influenced by Kraftwerk and based around drum machines and synths. Thanks to their American tour manager Ruth Polsky, who also worked as a booker for Hurrah’s and Danceteria, New Order encountered a kind of chic but cool nightclub totally different from the tacky discotheques and rock ’n’ roll pissholes they knew in the U.K. “The other thing we used to do when in New York,” recalls New Order drummer Steven Morris, “was just listen to Kiss FM, all those Pettibone mastermixes with tracks by Sharon Redd and D-Train. Half the time we used to just stay in the hotel listening to the radio! We didn’t dance, though, didn’t dance. It takes Ecstasy to make a white man dance.”

“When New Order originally came to New York, they were still sort of in the rock-y phase,” recalls Moscrop. Still shell-shocked by Ian Curtis’s death, the group stumbled through the second half of 1980, struggling to locate a new direction. New Order’s first single, “Ceremony,” was essentially the last Joy Division song, while the debut album, *Movement*, sounded stilted and unsure. Peter Hook recalls the period as a real low point for the group and for Martin Hannett. The only good thing to come out of the sessions, Hook says, was that Hannett showed the band how to operate the mixing board. “That was his fatal mistake! So when we came to do the single ‘Temptation,’ we fucked Martin off and did it ourselves.” Meanwhile, the group had been cheering itself up by listening to peppy electronic disco from Italy, and Morris had taught himself how to do drum programming.

Morris cites 1981’s “Everything’s Gone Green,” the electro-influenced single that immediately followed *Movement*, as the turning point. “That was the beginning of bringing the drum machine in and pressing the start button.” After their massive 1983 hit “Blue Monday,” New Order hooked up with Arthur Baker, then the hottest dance producer in New York, to make the single “Confusion.” The

video offered a fabulous snapshot of one corner of New York's postdisco scene, the Latin freestyle kids clustered around the Funhouse club. You can even see New Order carefully observing the dance floor response to "Confusion" as resident DJ Jellybean Benitez plays reel-to-reel tapes of the work in progress. The Hacienda, a Manchester club owned and funded by Factory and New Order, "was built because of Danceteria, Funhouse, Roxy, all these fantastic clubs in New York," says Moscrop. "New Order were thinking, 'Why haven't we got this in Manchester?' Like with the ESG record, it was Factory bringing a bit of New York back to England."

While New Order and A Certain Ratio couldn't get enough of the Manhattan vibe, by 1983 the native New Yorkers no longer reciprocated the feeling. Downtown's hitherto Anglophile hipsters mounted an anti-Limey backlash. The *East Village Eye* started a column called "The Real American Underground," celebrating the resurgence of groups influenced by rockabilly, blues, zydeco, and other roots music. Former No Waver Kristian Hoffman of the rockabilly-styled Swinging Madisons urged music fans to "demand more for your entertainment dollar than a bunch of tone-deaf Englishmen telling you what you ought to like," and declared that "the future is not in style anymore." Synths and drum machines were out, guitars were in again. Some turned to the hardcore punk scene, while the more arty types such as Sonic Youth and Swans moved to resurrect No Wave.

Very early on, Sonic Youth showed evidence of Anglophilia and PiL damage (their early drummer Richard Edson also played with 99 Records's resident Pigbag wannabes, Konk). But by 1983's *Confusion Is Sex*, Sonic Youth raised the banner of noxious noise, waging war against sterile machine funk. Guitarist Thurston Moore had already staged the first battle cry of the resistance with his Noise Fest of June 1981 at the White Columns art gallery in SoHo. Stretched across nine evenings, the entertainment included performances by the earliest incarnation of Sonic Youth, future SY guitarist Lee Ranaldo's band Avoidance Behavior, Glenn Branca, and long-running No Wave outfit Ut. "It was a watermark event because it took place at a time when the No Wave was gone and nobody knew each other," Moore recalled in 1985. Not everyone who attended was so thrilled. For Luc Sante, "much of the Noise Fest stuff seemed arid and theoretical and unsexy. It was heavily identified with a certain strain that had to do with Rhys Chatham and Glenn Branca, and came out of the Kitchen—very arty, sort of academic, and definitely not funky." Nonetheless, the No Wave redux of Sonic Youth and Swans represented the immediate future for New York. In the mideighties, the city's arty bands backed away from black influences and dance floor imperatives and instead drew on an almost totally white canon of avant-garde noise makers.

Like No Wave before it, the mutant disco moment had thrived on the back-and-forth between the rock scene and the art world. Ironically, what brought the era to a close was the explosion of the downtown art scene, which definitively eclipsed music as a career option for many of the city's Renaissance men and women. New art galleries sprang up all over the Lower East Side, showcasing nontraditional art of all kinds, from graffiti to video art to Kenny Scharf-style kitschedelic sculptures made from found objects and consumer detritus. The most famous of the new spaces was the FUN Gallery, which opened in 1981 and gave Scharf, Keith Haring, Futura 2000, and Jean-Michel Basquiat their first solo exhibitions. Within a few years there were literally dozens more galleries dotting an area hitherto known for its burned-out lots, boarded-up stores, and heroin-copping spots.

The precursors to the Lower East Side boom were two huge art exhibitions, 1980's *Time Square Show*, and 1981's *New York/New Wave*. "*Time Square Show* took place in an abandoned porn palace, all these graffiti artists showing together with downtown people," recalls Richard McGuire, himself an artist as well as musician. "*New York/New Wave* was a big show at PS1 in Queens, a big museum-like alternative gallery space in an old school building. All sorts of downtown people were involved. David Byrne showed photos of overturned chairs. DNA played. There were Mapplethorpe photos and lots of photos of rock stars."

New York/New Wave turned Basquiat and Haring into stars. As Vincent Gallo, Basquiat's erstwhile Gray bandmate put it acidly, "The minute Jean-Michel had a chance to move into the place he really wanted to be—the art world—he quit the band in a second." The bubble of dilettantism that had insulated and protected all the polymath creativity of downtown suddenly burst. "There'd been an incredible mix of filmmakers, musicians, poets, all this crossbreeding of artistic practices, but at a certain moment people began specializing," recalls Gary Indiana, himself a jack-of-all-arts in those days, involved in writing poetry and art criticism, directing plays, and playing music. "They began narrowing their field of interest to a specific thing they were going to make a career with. Reagan came in and everyone had to make money. You couldn't be all over the map anymore."

Another factor was a contraction of the live-music circuit, partly caused by the rise of clubs oriented around DJs rather than bands. Pat Place recalls a golden period when the Bush Tetras could play two or three times a month in New York and draw crowds between one and two thousand. "Back then, in our prime, we sometimes got paid from six to ten thousand dollars a night." Her erstwhile boss, James Chance,

also mourns the early eighties as the last time when New York “revolved around live music. Somewhere around 1984 that whole era of the mega-nightclub started up.” Rap and the electronic postdisco sounds that would eventually coalesce as “house music” were in the ascendant. Mutant disco and the arty, eclectic clubs that nurtured the style were squeezed out.

The Mudd Club had been killed by its own success. Maas had to hire doormen to deal with both the celebrities and the “bridge and tunnel” nonhipsters who wanted to get in. “I went into it as a fantasy, never expected it to make money,” he noted glumly in a 1983 *East Village Eye* elegy for the Mudd. “When the Mudd did become successful, I didn’t have the restaurateur’s skills that are essential to running any kind of operation. My fantasy went out the window.”

Downtown was changing. Gentrification made its first incursions into the Lower East Side. A pivotal moment was March 1984’s Operation Pressure Point, a massive drug bust whose targets included smack-infested Avenue B, masterminded by a thrusting young U.S. attorney for the southern district of New York named Rudolph Giuliani. Then AIDS came into the picture, claiming the lives of many artists (including Keith Haring) and some musicians, too, notably Klaus Nomi, in 1983, and Ricky Wilson of the B-52’s, in 1985.

Surveying the era with a couple of decades’ hindsight, Ann Magnuson concedes, “If you look back at it just as a series of parties, it does seem rather frivolous. But if you see it as people who loved each other, who were sharing their life energies, it was a celebration. They just wanted to live to the max, every second. When AIDS started picking everybody off one by one, it became obvious to me that it was about life. Keith Haring’s paintings in particular really exemplify that energy—that radiant-baby image of his. This was not that *Bright Lights*, *Big City* version of New York in the eighties, stockbrokers running around doing cocaine and chasing models. This was about people who had to leave where they came from originally to come to New York, or die. Who had to create art, or die.”

POSTCARD RECORDS AND THE SOUND OF YOUNG SCOTLAND

IN 1980, WHEN POSTPUNK seemed locked in a gloom-laden death trip, everything about Orange Juice felt different. The Glasgow group's very name was refreshing—sweet, wholesome, sunshine in a glass. “None of us drank alcohol at the time,” singer/guitarist Edwyn Collins recalled many years later. “Orange Juice seemed perfect because it was what we drank at rehearsals.” The music, a scintillating shambles of Byrds and Velvets, felt like a tonic, too. Above all, their debut single, “Falling and Laughing,” released in the spring of 1980, signaled the return of unabashed romance. Renouncing postpunk's demystification, Collins proclaimed the sacred singularity of his sweetheart: “You say there's a thousand like you/Well maybe that's true/I fell for you and nobody else.”

You could trace Collins's fey, bashful voice—“the sound of lovesick schoolboys,” as one journalist put it—back to the glorious, lump-in-throat wetness of Pete Shelley. When Buzzcocks played their first dates in Scotland as part of the White Riot Tour in 1977, they had more impact on the local scene than the headlining Clash. Buzzcocks “subverted people's ideas about what a punk group should be like,” Collins said. “I thought they were very witty, very camp.” Another White Riot Tour group that also enjoyed a disproportionate influence in Scotland was Subway Sect. Collins thrilled to the sparks and splinters flying off the Sect's abrasive guitars. “Rob Simmons's Fender Mustang was completely out of tune, the treble cranked up full,” he recalls. You can also hear a touch of Sect singer Vic Godard in Orange Juice's lyrics, especially with Collins's preference for charmingly quaint language, such as the chorus “Goodness gracious/You're so audacious,” which he simpers archly on “In a Nutshell.”

Orange Juice talked and acted in ways that broke with both rock's rebel swagger and postpunk's militant solemnity. They were literate, playful, witty, camp. “Everyone used to think we were a bunch of androgynous little twits,” Collins recalled. This exaggerated wimpiness was a revolt against the Glasgow music scene's traditional blues-rock machismo (Frankie Miller, Nazareth, Stone the Crows), but also against the hooligan menace of Scottish punks such as the Exploited. “Simply Thrilled Honey,” Orange Juice's third single, made sensitivity subversive. Based on a real incident, it depicted Collins as a shrinking violet, the reluctant prey of a female seducer. Collins told *Sounds*, “I didn't want to go to bed with her. I wasn't sexually attracted to her. But, above all, I didn't love her, and I think it's really important to only go to bed with someone if you love them. That's what the line ‘worldliness must keep apart from me’ means. There is such a pressure

on boys to be manly. I find going to bed with somebody you don't love disorientating."

In "Consolation Prize," the loveliest Orange Juice song of them all, Collins tries to woo a girl away from her boyfriend, a mean mistreater who has "crumpled up" her face in tears countless times. Collins, by contrast, makes her laugh with his "so frightfully camp" Roger McGuinn fringe. He even contemplates buying a dress if it'll only cheer her up. "I'll be your consolation prize," he pleads. In the end, he's resigned to remain unrequited. But as Orange Juice's golden cascades of guitars propel the song toward a climactic slow-fade, Collins almost rejoices in the fact that "I'll never be man enough for you." He sounds exultant rather than mournful, triumphant, not defeated.

The four members of Orange Juice all came from Bearsden, a middle-class suburb of Glasgow. "I met Edwyn on a school bus," recalls drummer Steven Daly. "James Kirk, our guitarist, was already my friend. On the bus Edwyn was reading *Melody Maker*—which was *not* the magazine to read then—and I joked, 'You don't read that old shit do you?' We were all music press slaves. The first pieces on CBGB came out in 1975. We were very interested in what was going on in New York. Television and Talking Heads had figured out more viable new ideas than most British punk bands." Indeed, when the fledgling Orange Juice put a "musicians wanted" ad in a local fanzine, the first line announced, "A New York band forming in the Bearsden area."

As much as the CBGB bands, what unified Orange Juice was their love of an earlier New York group, the Velvet Underground. Collins would place *Live 1969* on his record player and leave it playing on repeat for hours while he puttered around his Glasgow flat. *Live 1969*'s gatefold sleeve showed Lou Reed holding a Country Gentleman guitar manufactured by Gretsch, a brand that took on a talismanic significance for Orange Juice. "We avoided the two major rock guitars, the Fender and the Gibson. Playing Gretsches was about bringing back a sixties sensibility, but still having the freneticism of punk. Nobody else used them at the time."

The core of Orange Juice's sound was the sparkly drive of rhythm guitar played at double the tempo of the drumbeat. The idea came half from the late-era Velvets and half from Chic. Disco was the wild card in Orange Juice's mix. Before punk, Collins had been a regular at church hall youth dances and the Glasgow discotheque Shuffles. "The thing about us blending Chic and Velvets, it sounds really audacious on paper, but if you listen to *Live 1969*, the double-time rhythm guitar on 'Rock and Roll' is not a million miles apart from Nile Rodgers's guitar playing in Chic," says Daly. "Very clipped. Not jangly, which is the cliché journalists always applied to Orange Juice. The strings are

actually being damped, so it's more choppy than jangly."

In 1978, a nineteen-year-old überhipster named Alan Horne witnessed a gig by Orange Juice (then known as the Nu-Sonics) and was struck by two things. The first was their cover of "We're Gonna Have a Real Good Time Together," an obscure Velvet's song only ever captured on *Live 1969*. Cooler still, an associate of the band's came onstage to chant the catchphrase from Chic's recent U.K. hit "Dance Dance Dance (Yowsah Yowsah Yowsah)." Daly had already met Horne, then a botany student, when the latter came into Listen, the record shop where Daly worked. "We got talking. Alan was an interesting, overamped character." Daly told him about the upcoming gig. After checking out the band, the abrasively opinionated Horne offered them advice, whether they wanted it or not. "He probably told us we were shit," says Daly. "But he could see the potential."

In particular, Horne detected star quality in Edwyn Collins. In typical abrasive fashion, though, he greeted Collins—who was dressed in Levis, motorcycle boots, and a plaid shirt—with the words "look at the fucking *wimp!* You're John Boy Walton!" For his part, Collins's memory of this first meeting has Horne wearing "a Harris Tweed jacket and hidden under the lapel was a little Nazi badge." A fan of provocation for its own sake, Horne liked to flirt with Nazi symbols purely to annoy. "He wanted to come onstage with us wearing lederhosen and do 'Springtime for Hitler' from *The Producers*," says Collins. "It all came out of being a glam fan—*Cabaret's* Berlin decadence, Lou Reed having the Iron Cross shaved in his hair on the Rock and Roll Animal Tour. Nineteen seventy-eight was when Rock Against Racism and silly things like that were going on and Alan quipped, 'I'd rather have a movement called Racism Against Rock.' He also did a fanzine which featured crude little cartoons of Brian Superstar, his flatmate, in a Nazi uniform."

Superstar and Horne both fit the music scene archetype of the catalyst figure who doesn't necessarily contribute musically but who shapes opinion and serves as a custodian and transmitter of esoteric knowledge. Horne was a connoisseur of prepunk music, and had boxes of classic 45s ranging from Elektra's psychedelic rock to Northern soul. Brian Superstar, later a member of the cult Scottish indie group the Pastels, "would hip you to things," says Daly. "There was so little material available in those days. You literally could not find the cool records, because record companies deleted them from their catalogs. But Brian would spend the extra time and money to find the exotic rarities, like Gram Parsons, say. He also had a VCR, something almost unheard-of in 1978. We'd watch certain videos over and over, like this *History of Rock* program that showed the Byrds doing 'Mr. Tambourine Man.' A whole golden age was brought back to life by this

documentary.”

All this archival arcana and period detail informed Orange Juice’s retro-eclectic approach to piecing together an identity. They’d take “jangly lead guitar lines from the more country-influenced sixties rock of [the] Byrds and Lovin’ Spoonful,” says Daly, but combine that with a touch of ’70s soul. Or they’d mismatch Subway Sect guitar scratch with a disco-style walking bassline. “It doesn’t surprise me that Steven Daly has since become a journalist, because he was the most analytical one of all of us,” says Collins. “He used to say, ‘Ooh, I like this sound on this record,’ and ‘Maybe we should take this sound from another record.’ And this was all presampling.” The same applied to the way Orange Juice constructed their image. “With Brian Superstar’s videos, you could see what the groups were *wearing*,” says Daly. Scrutinizing *The History of Rock* and the covers of their favorite albums such as *Pet Sounds*, Orange Juice came up with a mélange look that included mod-style suede jackets, horizontally striped T-shirts redolent of Warhol’s Factory, Creedence Clearwater Revival-inspired plaid shirts, raccoon hats, and plastic sandals. Strikingly different from the monochrome postpunk norm, the group’s appearance gave off intriguingly mixed signals, combining several different phases of the sixties, Americana, rock scholarship, and childhood innocence.

“Falling and Laughing” was Orange Juice’s first release, jointly financed by Alan Horne, Edwyn Collins, and OJ bassist David McClymont. Because Horne wasn’t in the band, he gradually took on the role of Orange Juice’s manager and boss of the label, which they christened Postcard. It suited his pushy personality. “Alan loved it when you’d jokingly call him Mr. Postcard,” recalls Collins. “He wanted to be the Svengali figure. He was a control freak. As well as running Postcard, he also sort of managed all the groups on the label. It was the punk managers that interested him—McLaren, Bernie Rhodes, Kay Carroll with the Fall. Alan used to say that the great thing about punk is that it’s brought in an era where the manager is as important as the group. In early punk interviews, the manager often assumed the same importance as the singer.”

Other punk-era managers operating in the provinces started labels purely as a way of getting attention for their bands. The independently released single figured as a superior form of demo tape, indicating real gumption and determination. Horne was more ambitious, though. He wanted to get Orange Juice onto the pop charts without resorting to the major-label system. Horne was one of the very first people to sense that the independent charts had become a low horizon for bands. “Music should always aim for the widest possible market,” Horne proclaimed in an early Postcard feature. “The charts are there. That’s where you need to be.” Borrowing a phrase

from Dexys' Kevin Rowland, he mocked the "brown rice independents" for their "hippy attitude" of dropping out and staying pure.

To get Postcard's records distributed, though, Horne had to deal with Rough Trade, a label as brown-rice as they came. The relationship between the motormouthed Horne and the deceptively soft-spoken but tenacious Geoff Travis was frictional. "I really loved 'Falling and Laughing,'" says Travis. "But I was a little disappointed by the second single 'Blue Boy,' and I wasn't particularly impressed by Alan's hustle when they came down to London looking for a distribution deal. Then I changed my mind and realized I made a mistake. I offered them a good deal, which Alan then told everybody was a deal that would bankrupt Rough Trade. But you know, Alan wanted to have an abrasive relationship with everybody because he thought he was Warhol."

Horne knew that John Peel's support was crucial for independent releases, especially those from outside London. But Peel had actually *been* a hippie once and his Radio One show represented everything Horne despised about the new postpunk DIY ghetto. So Horne barged his way into the BBC and berated Peel, insulting the music the DJ played as "just a *nice bore*" and warning him that Postcard was "the future and either you'll get wise to that or you'll look very stupid." This intimidation tactic backfired. As Collins recalled, "That night Peel said on the air that he'd been confronted by a truculent youth from Glasgow," adding that he was going to play "Falling and Laughing" just once and that was it.

Given how peripheral Glasgow was back then in relation to the rest of the U.K. music scene, Postcard depended on the weekly music press for exposure. "The papers were our only hope really," says Daly. "The record industry was clueless and had to be told where to look. So who told them where to look? The music press. We thought if we send out this message in a bottle, Paul Morley at *NME* and Dave McCullough at *Sounds* will get it."

Morley and McCullough had been the most prominent champions of Joy Division at their respective papers. In the summer of 1980, hit hard by Ian Curtis's suicide, both writers were looking for something life affirming, a postpunk path that led away from the literally dead end of despair represented by *Closer*. The Postcard sound arrived in the nick of time. "Postpunk had dried up," says Daly. "I liked PiL's *Metal Box*, but it was pointing people in a bad direction. So Orange Juice was turning away from the dark side, and we were very influential on what ended up being called New Pop. We struck a nerve with the media-conscious people, the future tastemakers. We were very clever, meta-aware, and having fun with it." Orange Juice's sense

of humor was crucial. That was why their debut single was called “Falling and Laughing.” In the song, Collins proposed a merry sense of one’s own absurdity as a salve for love’s humiliations: “What can I do but learn to laugh at myself?” Love tore you apart again and again, but in Orange Juice’s world, heartbreak always came with a side order of quips.

Orange Juice remained Postcard’s priority, but Horne began filling out the label’s roster with other Scottish talent such as Glasgow’s Aztec Camera and Edinburgh’s Josef K, plus honorary Caledonians the Go-Betweens, who actually hailed from Australia, but had a spare, plangent sound similarly rooted in Television and early Talking Heads. Postcard’s sleeves played on tartan patterns and other clichéd Scottish imagery, as if they were a branch of the Scottish Tourist Board. “The Sound of Young Scotland,” Horne called it in a nod to Motown, whose hit factory approach he admired.

Josef K came through Daly, who’d actually quit Orange Juice for a while and started his own label, Absolute. In Edinburgh he’d met Malcolm Ross, guitarist in a band called TV Art. When Daly convinced them that the name was terrible, the group renamed themselves Josef K after the protagonist in Kafka’s *The Trial*. Horne wooed Daly back into the Orange Juice fold by accompanying him on a trip to London to pick up Josef K’s debut single from the pressing plant and take copies to distributors such as Small Wonder. “Orange Juice and Josef K formed a sort of alliance,” says Ross. “They’d support us in Edinburgh, we’d support them in Glasgow.”

Like Orange Juice, Josef K had a clean image (sharp, monochrome suits from thrift stores) and a clean sound. Both groups shared a penchant for the cerebral side of American punk, groups such as Television, Pere Ubu, Talking Heads, the Voidoids. “I never saw any of the New York groups as part of rock ’n’ roll, all those moldy old bands with long hair,” says front man Paul Haig. “I much preferred Television’s crisp, clear sound to the blasting of the Clash and the Pistols. Malcolm and I went down to London to see Talking Heads. Nine hours on the bus. Sleeping in a bus shelter. We were half asleep at the actual gig because we were so tired!”

Inspired by *Talking Heads* 77 and the brittle clangor of Subway Sect, Josef K tried to get their guitars to sound as “toppy” as they could. Says Ross, “It was just a matter of avoiding distortion and turning the treble up full. We liked playing really fast rhythms, and you needed a really sharp sound for those to work. Using distortion meant you’d lose the effect.” Coiled and keen, barbed and wired, Ross’s and Haig’s guitars caromed off the fastfunk groove churned up by bassist Davy Weddell and drummer Ronnie Torrance. “In the very early days, it was just me playing guitar with Ronnie drumming up in

his attic,” says Haig. “Ronnie’d always follow my rhythm guitar and we carried that on into Josef K. He’d never listen to the bass, like drummers are supposed to.” The resulting “strange chemistry” between Torrance’s all-out exuberance and the abrasive flurry of the guitars gave Josef K their frenetic momentum.

Josef K’s disco punk had a similar flustered quality to Orange Juice’s Chic/Velvets rhythm guitar, and Haig’s croon—midway between Lou Reed and Frank Sinatra—was as strikingly un-rock ’n’ roll as Edwyn Collins’s voice, but the overall Josef K sound was harsher and the songs came from a less optimistic place. Haig was a fragile figure, six feet tall but only 109 pounds. He confesses to being “almost anorexic. I was just depressed and I didn’t eat very much. I’d got obsessed with looking at calories and what I was eating. At that point I was fading away to nothing.” One of Josef K’s best songs, “It’s Kinda Funny,” was inspired by Ian Curtis’s death. “I loved Joy Division and was really freaked out that he could take his own life aged twenty-three,” recalls Haig. “Just the thought of how easy it was to disappear through a crack in the world.” Still, he stresses that “It’s Kinda Funny,” while “not a happy song,” was “saying you don’t have to be depressed about life, you can still laugh about it.”

Throughout the Josef K songbook, Haig sounds high on anxiety, finding a strange, giddy euphoria in doubt. Nourished by an intellectual diet of Penguin Modern Classics and European existentialism, Haig addressed “man’s endless struggle” on songs such as “Sorry for Laughing” (“there’s too much happening”) and “Radio Drill Time” (“we can glide into trance”). On the group’s masterpiece, “Endless Soul,” the singer’s suave croon surfs the fraught glory of Josef K’s guitars as if trying to strike the correct, flattering posture in the face of “the absurdity of being alive in a godless, vacuous universe,” as Haig puts it.

Books shaped Josef K as much as music: Kafka, obviously, but also Camus, Hesse, Dostoyevsky, and Knut Hamsun. “Reading gave me so many ideas for lyrics,” says Haig. “In those days I never thought about politics for one second, I was only trying to project thoughts about the human condition. Orange Juice were into a different kind of literature. Edwyn would be reading *Catcher in the Rye* while we’d be reading *The Trial*. That explains a lot about the difference between the bands!”

Critics loved Josef K’s literate lyrics and their music’s weird mix of poise and frenzy, but despite the rave reviews, Alan Horne himself was never very sure about the band. “Alan had this vision for Orange Juice all along, to turn them into a great pop band, but he found Josef K far too abrasive and dark,” admits Haig. “He wanted us on the label to add some cred and widen its output. But the cockroach became too

fat on a diet of Kafka and press clippings!”

Josef K quickly found themselves at the epicenter of an Edinburgh scene populated by postpunk bibliophiles. “There was a certain period in Edinburgh when all the New Wave bands were into reading,” chuckles Haig. “Davy Henderson from the Fire Engines, Ross Middleton from Positive Noise, Richard Jobson from the Skids, you’d always see them with a book in their pocket.” The city’s postpunk literati haunted a pub called the Tap of Lauriston, which was directly opposite Edinburgh’s art college. Josef K weren’t much for drinking, though. Ross, Haig, and Weddell stuck mostly to soft drinks. Only Torrance would have a pint, or several. It was as though all the band’s banished rock ’n’ rollness was concentrated in the body of their drummer. “At gigs we’d leave the rider untouched but Ronnie would stuff all the beer in his drum case bags,” recalls Haig. Torrance’s appearance also stuck out like a sore thumb. “Josef K had this band camaraderie thing and we’d all wear long gray raincoats, except for Ronnie, who’d sometimes upset us greatly by wearing yellow trousers and pointed blue suede shoes. Ron was into the whole rock ’n’ roll trip. He’d even get groupies. *We* never got groupies.”

Josef K, says Ross, “didn’t like laddishness or sexism. If girls came back to the dressing room to talk, we wouldn’t be trying to get off with them or anything like that.” Orange Juice were just the same. “We were a cute band dressed in an interesting style, so we had girls following us, but I don’t think we took advantage,” recalls Daly with a hint of wistfulness. “I remember opportunities to take advantage and not doing it. It seems absolutely ridiculous in retrospect! We were pretty naïve lads.” In an early *Sounds* feature on Postcard, Dave McCullough tagged the label’s sensibility as “New Puritan,” a term borrowed from Mark E. Smith. Orange Juice, Josef K, and Aztec Camera all frowned on drugs and excessive drinking. “We *were* quite puritanical,” says Ross. “We didn’t smoke dope or believe in getting drunk. Speeding a little bit was acceptable. Amphetamine related to the mod thing of being in control and alert. I wanted some kind of dignity.”

As part of their antirock stance, Josef K never played encores. “I always used to find encores patronizing,” says Ross. “The roadies would come on to pack up the guitars, but if you clapped loud enough the band would come on again. That was the kind of ritual that Postcard wanted to change.” Haig also refused to indulge the audience with banter or pleasantries. “Instead, Paul taped intros to the songs that we’d play over the PA,” chuckles Ross. “We were into all these Brechtian alienation techniques.” Haig recalls barely being able to bring himself to utter the word “gig” because it was too disgustingly rock ’n’ roll. “I preferred to say ‘concert,’ but you couldn’t really say

that when you were playing just a wee venue.”

Josef K's antirockism was surpassed by the second great Edinburgh group of this era, the Fire Engines, who famously played sets that lasted only fifteen minutes. “What’s the point in getting the audience bored?!” demanded singer Davy Henderson in *NME*. “Where’s the value there?! Is it the amount of time you’re on, or the amount of excitement you get out of it?” Yet another Scottish group inspired into existence by the prickly guitars of Subway Sect, the Fire Engines added Beefheart barbs and Contortions jolts to create a sound of itchy energy. On their archetypal tune “Discord,” high-toned bass and loping drums create a nervous, hyperactive funk. The guitars throw out electric sparks like live wires that are cut and writhing, and Henderson yelps like a pixie version of James Brown at his most agitated.

Horne desperately wanted the Fire Engines for Postcard, but so did Bob Last of Fast Product, which was actually based in Edinburgh. Like Horne, Last believed that independent culture was in danger of becoming a ghetto. He encouraged his bands, such as the abrasive but poppy local outfit the Scars, to sign to major labels. Despite (or perhaps because of) the similarity in outlook between Horne and Last, there was a bristling rivalry between Postcard and Fast Product. Horne was all set to release a Fire Engines live tape on his projected sublabel, I Wish I Was a Postcard, but Last moved quickly and whisked the band into the studio to record the launch release for *his* new label, Pop:Aural. “I dissolved Fast and started Pop:Aural because I wanted to experiment with being more commercial,” says Last. Just like Horne, he wanted to see if it was possible to get onto the proper pop charts while remaining independent.

The Fire Engines’ *Lubricate Your Living Room*, the debut release for Pop:Aural, wasn’t exactly pop music, though. For a start, it was mostly instrumental, give or take the stray chants and nonverbal shrieks of excitement from Henderson. It wasn’t exactly a single or an LP, but a deliberately unclassifiable release. Despite featuring nine tracks stretched across a 33 rpm twelve-inch single and selling at the budget price of two and a half pounds, *Lubricate* was *not* the group’s first album, as Henderson stressed. Rather it was a sort of dub remix of the debut LP before it actually existed. “[It’s] like our songs with the words taken away and the lengths extended. It was Bob Last’s idea and he wanted to use us and we were quite into being used in this type of way.” Echoed in the track title “Get Up and Use Me,” Last’s governing concept was *useful* music, as opposed to “art” for passive contemplation. “Background beat for active people,” *Lubricate* was the hyperkinetic opposite of chill-out music or Eno’s series of ambient albums, something you’d play to vibe yourself up before you went out

for the evening.

On its release in January 1981, *Lubricate* was a critical smash and a big independent hit, but the Fire Engines' wonderfully frangible music fell a long way short of the chart-infiltrating pop Last envisioned for Pop:Aural. "The Fire Engines were a transitional thing because they weren't glossy," he says. For the next single, "Candyskin," Last hired half a dozen string players to add a hilariously incongruous symphonic patina to the group's jagged sound. "The Fire Engines were so abrasive you could get away with using a string section without it being kitsch. But after a while, I told them they couldn't go on doing what they were doing because it'd just be less of the same. So they reinvented themselves as Win, a proper pop group."

The Associates—Edinburgh's greatest group of this period—were the city's real-deal pop proposition. Unlike Josef K or Davy Henderson's mob, they would actually, eventually, go all the way. Singer Billy Mackenzie had a multioctave voice and the supernatural glow of a born star. The band's multi-instrumentalist/music director Alan Rankine was gorgeous, his dark, sultry looks making for perfect visual chemistry with Mackenzie's pale, vaguely aristocratic cast. "Malcolm Ross and I went to see the first-ever Associates gig in Edinburgh at the Aquarius Club," recalls Haig. "They looked amazing. They all had red silk shirts on. We started to become friends because Josef K and Associates played together so many times. Billy became my absolute soul mate, off his head but in a good way."

Before the Associates, Rankine and Mackenzie earned a good living as members of cabaret ensemble Mental Torture. At their hotel residencies they performed campy remakes of showbiz standards ("Shadow of Your Smile" became "Shadow of My Lung") and original songs such as the *Rocky Horror*-like "Not Tonight Josephine." Shortly after they'd first met, Mackenzie moved in with Rankine and they started writing loads of songs. "Bill was a fizzing *mental* flatmate," says Rankine. "One time he absentmindedly put the plastic kettle on the gas oven and it melted all over the cooker." Mackenzie buzzed with a sort of innate speediness. "You could always tell there was something unsettled deep within him. Bill could never just switch off, unless it was watching a wildlife documentary on TV. He saw animals as pure, having this grace and nobility he admired, something he didn't see in humans. With animals, there was no agenda, no bullshit."

Rankine and Mackenzie decided to give up entertaining middle-aged hotel patrons and have a stab at full-blown art pop. As the Associates, they developed a sound based around their mutual appreciation for the more eccentric end of glam (Roxy Music, Sparks), disco, and movie scores. "We shared a massive love of the grandeur of film soundtracks," says Rankine. "We cataloged the whole thing,

worked out what the composers were doing to play on people's emotions with no lyrics, and then we put those tricks and that language into what we were doing. We threw in everything but the kitchen sink. When we recorded, we never had enough time or tracks."

Both Rankine and Mackenzie shared the view that during the progressive-rock era of 1967 to 1975, the art of classic song craft had died, having been smothered by exhibitionistic instrumental virtuosity. Ironically, Rankine was one of the postpunk era's great guitarists. "There was a definite period around 1979–81 where, because of the setup in bands—just guitar, bass, drums, vocal—it was the guitarist who virtually carried the can for all the sound textures in the group," says Rankine. "I was just trying to use the most basic effects, like the Roland Space Echo turned up full, to make the biggest sounds I possibly could, just to back up the grandeur of what Bill was trying to do vocally. You've got to remember, he had no backing vocals harmonizing with him. I tried to make a wall of sound without sounding like punk thrash. Postpunk was all about the creeping back in of degrees of subtlety, giving the song a chance to breathe."

The Associates' sound mixed postpunk modernism (the ice-swirl spires of Rankine's guitar) and the more postmodern traits of New Pop. In the Associates' case, that meant flashbacks to the stylized romance of bygone forms such as prewar torch songs, postwar musicals, Sinatra-style crooners, and existentialist balladeer Scott Walker's orchestrated solo albums. Mackenzie's towering vocals conjured up a lost era when the malady of love was expressed in epic proportions, when singers *luxuriated* in grief. "There was a hell of a Germanic thing going on in our music too," says Rankine. "Billy got that from Kraftwerk. He liked the starkness. A lot of Bill's vocal melodies are not rhythmic. They're stately, they've got a dignity to them. He was very conscious that he didn't want to get into things that were too obviously rhythmic, because that would have been too Americanized. It's only in retrospect, when you've got a whole body of work, that you notice, 'Wait a minute, how come we haven't got one song that's really groovy, and with some overt sexuality to it?'"

And yet the music was erotic in its textured sensuousness, while Mackenzie was nothing if not a highly sexual being. "It's the weirdest thing. I knew Bill was gay from the moment I met him in 1976, but it really didn't cross my mind again," says Rankine. "When we were recording, Bill would sometimes disappear from the studio for six hours at a time and I'd think to myself, maybe he's off walking around getting ideas for lyrics or just clearing his head. But for all I know he was out cruising for six hours!" Mackenzie was actually more omni-sexual than "gay" in any strictly defined sense. Or as Rankine puts it,

“He’d shag anything with a pulse! But the serious side of that was that this was a guy who was constantly questioning himself. He was striving for the third sex.” Mackenzie himself confessed, “I’m the type of person who sees beyond genders. I don’t have many emotional boundaries or hang-ups about who I like, where I like, when I like.... I can swing with the best of them.”

For their self-released debut single, the Associates covered Bowie’s “Boys Keep Swinging.” Their version came out in late 1979, only months after the original left the charts. As a way of announcing themselves to the world, it neatly combined hubris and homage, simultaneously sparring with and paying tribute to Bowie, one of the biggest influences on Mackenzie’s vocal style. The single caught the ear of Fiction Records, the New Wave subsidiary of Polydor and home of the Cure. In August 1980, just as the music press buzz about Scotland was building, Fiction released the debut Associates album, *The Affectionate Punch*. The striking cover image showed Mackenzie and Rankine as athletes hunched together at the start of a running track. It was a “clean,” healthy, faintly Nietzschean image expressing the singer’s belief that music, bodily movement, and physical fitness were closely related. “Bill had been a very good runner, I had been a very good tennis player,” recalls Rankine. “So that imagery was related to trying to be...not superior exactly, but rising above the shit and nonsense of rock ‘n’ roll and the music business.”

The Affectionate Punch’s windswept never-neverpop garnered a warm critical reception, but sales of the album were modest, and the Associates quickly parted company with Fiction. Mackenzie’s and Rankine’s master plan for 1981 was to make their mark with six singles released in swift succession via the label Situation Two, an imprint of Beggar’s Banquet. Mackenzie announced in *Melody Maker*, “1981 is going to be the year of singles. [Singles] are a lot more fun and disposable and they’ve got an air of excitement about them.” The singles plan was also a bit of a scam. Now living in London, the Associates desperately needed income. In addition to Mackenzie and Rankine, there was also bassist Mike Dempsey and drummer John Murphy to support. They had wrangled money out of a publishing company to record demos, ostensibly to send to major labels, and used the funds to book ultracheap graveyard shift sessions at a studio. “Nine P.M. Sunday night until nine A.M. Monday morning, only a hundred pounds,” says Rankine. In a fever of chemically enhanced creativity, the Associates went into the studio every Sunday night for ten weeks and worked until nine in the morning. The substantial difference between what the recordings cost and what Situation Two paid for the singles enabled the group to live handsomely. “I must stress there’s *nothing illegal* about what we were doing!” says Rankine.

“It’s just that we weren’t telling Situation Two we were making the singles so cheaply. So it *felt* like a scam to us.”

The coproducer of the Situation Two singles, Flood (who would later work with Depeche Mode and U2) has spoken of “the element of chaos” surrounding the sessions. Rankine and Mackenzie “were full-on, just hyper-creative and a good laugh. They were pretty fueled and go-faster on the sessions and a lot of ridiculous things went on.” Avid but naïve consumers of drugs, they once ended up in the hospital after recklessly snorting seven grams of speed (they thought it was actually one gram of cocaine). “We were just about dead,” Mackenzie told *Melody Maker*. “It was the first time I’d taken speed and I didn’t know anything about it. We just seriously overdosed. I was a virgin, pharmaceutically. Freakin’ out, man!” Rankine recalls the two of them being in the same hospital room wired up to EKG monitors for four days. “Bill was opposite me, and me opposite him, so I could see his heart rate readout. And when his went to one hundred fifty-eight, mine would go up in a panic attack. And when he saw my readout, his would go up even further. It was just a vicious circle. Consequently our balls shrank up inside our bodies and our knobs were the size of walnuts.”

The music that the Associates produced during these chemical-addled sessions was psychedelic, not in any literal, flashback-to-1967 way, but in its pursuit of mutated sounds, saturated textures, and unusual instrumentation. “We did things like ‘balloon guitar’ where you fill a balloon with water until it’s the size of a fairly small breast, and then get feedback out of your amp and modulate it by wiggling the balloon directly on the strings,” recalls Rankine. “We got into glockenspiel, xylophones, vibraphone, but using them in a manic way that hadn’t been done before. We also did vocal treatments. ‘Kitchen Person’ has Bill singing down the long tubing off a vacuum cleaner, while on ‘White Car in Germany,’ some of the vocals were literally sung through a greaseproof paper and a comb!”

One of the Associates’ greatest songs, “White Car in Germany” taps into the un-American “Europe Endless”-ness of Kraftwerk and Bowie’s Berlin trilogy. Mackenzie operatically declaims cryptic lines such as “Walk on eggs in Munich” and “Düsseldorf’s a cold place/Cold as spies can be” over a metronomic march rhythm. There was definitely something Old World about the Associates’ 1981 singles, an ancien régime atmosphere of fading grandeur. “Q Quarters,” another Associates classic, sounds like Hapsburg dub. Its furtive rhythm, broken balalaika riff, echoing footsteps, and dank electronic atmospheres conjure cold war scenarios redolent of *The Third Man* and *The Ipcress File*: partitioned cities, deportations, informers, and double agents. “Ooh, that’s a dark song,” says Rankine. “I’ve heard dogs howl

to 'Q Quarters,' run out the room and cover their heads with their paws! Bill just let rip with the imagery. The line 'Washing down bodies seems to me a dead-end chore' comes from his grandma, who had worked in the morgue during the Second World War."

Beginning in April 1981 and ending eight months later, the run of six singles received rave reviews but none got anywhere near the charts. Yet gathered together on the compilation album *Fourth Drawer Down* (the title referred to the place the group kept the herbal sedative pills that helped them achieve a warm, pleasantly fuzzy comedown after their manic Sunday-night sessions), the Associates' 1981 output added up to an astonishing body of work. Mackenzie and Rankine were dissatisfied, though. "At the beginning of last year I thought it was going to be the year of singles," Mackenzie recollected in an early 1982 interview. "And it was. The thing with our singles was that they got peeled off the turntable halfway through! We want to keep our singles on the turntable this year." The Associates' ambition wasn't going to be sated by being critical darlings and cult favorites. They wanted to be the Bowie or Roxy of the eighties.

BY MID-1981, Postcard Records had reached an impasse. In many ways, the label had achieved astonishing things in an incredibly short period. Orange Juice's second single, "Blue Boy," sold nearly twenty thousand copies and has been described as the Scottish "Anarchy in the U.K." for its galvanizing effect on new bands north of Hadrian's Wall. With Orange Juice's, Josef K's, and Aztec Camera's singles barraging the upper reaches of the independent charts, Postcard took Scottish pop from a buzz in 1980 to the Sound of 1981. London's myopic A&R scouts took heed and started flying up to Glasgow and Edinburgh in droves.

Try as they might, though, Postcard couldn't propel its groups onto the pop charts. In April 1981, Orange Juice's fourth single, "Poor Old Soul," was number one on the independent charts but it only reached number eighty on the "real" charts, where penetrating the Top 75 was the industry definition of a hit. Frustrated, Horne began to contemplate the previously abhorrent notion of hooking up Orange Juice with a London-based major label before the momentum they'd built dissipated. It seemed it might even be necessary to slap a coat of gloss over the group's music. Orange Juice still sounded too scruffy and scratchy in the pop-chart context.

Meanwhile, Josef K took the next logical step and recorded their debut album. What should have been a triumph turned into a debacle. *Sorry for Laughing*, as the LP was originally called, sounded too glossy

for the band's liking. "The manic and abrasive edge apparent when we played live was missing," says Haig. Josef K proceeded to rerecord the entire album (jettisoning some of their best songs in the process). Retitled *The Only Fun in Town*, it was released in June 1981. "*Only Fun* was all recorded in a couple of days, like a Velvet Underground record would have been," recalls Haig. "We purposely drowned the vocals out with guitars in order to get a more live sound. It was an unconscious act of commercial suicide, definitely!" In hindsight, Malcolm Ross regrets the decision. "We should just have released the first version, *Sorry for Laughing*. It would have been out six months earlier than *Only Fun*, so we wouldn't have lost all that momentum we had."

Josef K's critical champions, Morley at *NME* and McCullough at *Sounds*, were horrified by *The Only Fun in Town*, feeling the group had betrayed its pop promise and their expectations. Despite the bad reviews, the album actually sold well, climbed the independent charts, and even enjoyed something of a legacy through its influence on a breed of abrasive indie guitar pop, exemplified by such mideighties bands as the June Brides, the Pastels, and the Wedding Present. But in 1981, the perception was that Josef K had missed their moment. By autumn, the group had split up, with Haig leaving to pursue an electronic-dance direction as Rhythm of Life.

In the last months of 1981, Postcard looked out of step. Synths, string sections, and a slickness beyond Horne and his groups' reach were the new state of the art. Fatally, the Postcard sound was a rock scholar's idea of "pure pop." It played fantastically well within the circuit of the music press and the independent charts, but compared to "proper" pop music it sounded spindly and amateurish.

Still, Postcard had played a huge role in turning hipster opinion against the dowdy seriousness of postpunk. Almost single-handedly they'd made melody, fun, and love songs cool again. "Funk" was the big buzzword of 1981, but few remembered that Orange Juice's "Falling and Laughing" featured a disco-y bassline or that the group had precociously celebrated Chic. Postcard and Orange Juice had put the concept of "pop" back on the table, but pop, that cruel mistress, had moved too fast for them to keep up. Or had it?

SYNTHPOP

THE HUMAN LEAGUE ARRIVED with as much fanfare as a new group could hope for. Signed to Virgin, they were touted as the next big thing. David Bowie proclaimed that “watching them is like watching 1980.” Admittedly, he said this in 1979. Still, to be decreed a full year ahead of the pack by the glamdaddy of all things cutting-edge was indeed a fabulous endorsement. When 1980 actually rolled around, though, the Human League seemed stuck. They’d been one of the very first postpunk outfits to talk up “pop” as something to aspire to. Yet they’d failed to become pop. Their first two albums for Virgin, 1979’s *Reproduction* and 1980’s *Travelogue*, sold modestly. Compared to Giorgio Moroder’s Eurodisco production of Donna Summer and Sparks, *Reproduction*’s version of electrofuturism sounded creaky and strangely quaint, and the League knew it. “We wanted our records to be more brutal on the rhythmic level, but at that point the engineers and producers available in Britain weren’t up to it,” says Ian Craig Marsh.

Travelogue sounded slightly more forceful and glossy, but a hit single continued to elude the group. As if to rub salt in their wounds, on the eve of its release, pop punkers the Undertones ridiculed the Human League in their Top 10 hit “My Perfect Cousin.” “Kevin,” the song’s goody-two-shoes subject (he’s got a degree “in economics, maths, physics, and bionics”), starts an electronic band with some art school boys. “His mother bought him a *synthesizer*,” spits singer Feargal Sharkey with disgust, “Got the Human League in to advise her.” Now that he’s in a band, Kevin gets girls chasing him, “But what a shame/It’s in vain...Kevin, he’s in love with himself.” The song crystallized the early Human League’s public image as music for narcissistic art school poseurs and science geeks.

The group’s cold, off-putting aura was exacerbated by the science-fiction subject matter of many of their early songs. *Reproduction*’s big single, “Empire State Human,” concerned a man who keeps on growing. *Travelogue*’s “The Black Hit of Space” imagines a record so monstrously bland that it turns into a kind of predatory cultural void sucking up everything in its path. As it climbs the charts, the rest of the Top 40 disappears, “until there was nothing but it left to buy.” All the witty astrophysical details in the lyric (gravity being so multiplied in proximity to the disc that your record player’s tonearm weighs “more than Saturn,” and so forth) only confirmed the band’s geeky image. These were the sort of people who read *New Scientist* and *Omni* and who watched James Burke’s *Connections*.

In a bid to stake their claim on being “tomorrow’s pop today,” the

Human League came up with the ambitious and slightly loony idea of doing fully automated shows. "Talking Heads asked us to be the support group on their 1980 U.K. tour and we said, 'We'll do the gigs but we wanna be in the audience and watch the show,'" grins Marsh, still enthused by the idea over twenty years later. "We'd got these new synchronization units that operated the slide show in sync with the music. We guaranteed that while we wouldn't be onstage we'd be at every gig talking to the audience, shaking hands and signing autographs." Says Martyn Ware, "We'd got a long way down the line, all the programming was done. It was going to be this big multimedia show, but Talking Heads changed their minds. Maybe they thought they were going to be upstaged."

It was as if a curse thwarted the Human League at every step. In May 1980, the League's *Holiday 80* double single scraped the lower end of the Top 75, and *Top of the Pops*, almost in an act of charity, invited them to appear on the show to perform their cover of Gary Glitter's "Rock 'n' Roll, Part One." Even after this fabulous exposure to the British record-buying public, Human League didn't make the true Top 40 hit parade. What really hurt was that by mid-1980 it seemed like virtually *anybody* wielding a synth could become a pop star. One year earlier, Tubeway Army's "Are 'Friends' Electric?" had reached number one, the first in a string of huge hits for the group's singer and mastermind, Gary Numan, and the trigger for a deluge of synth-laced chart incursions from acts such as John Foxx, Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, Ultravox, Visage, and Spandau Ballet. Everybody but the Human League. In the year since Bowie had heralded them, the group had gone from being ahead of their time to lagging behind the futurist pack.

Numan had become a synthpop pioneer almost by accident. Making the first Tubeway Army album in Spaceward Studio in the summer of 1978, he stumbled across a Minimoog left behind by another band. "Although I liked some electronic music I still associated it mainly with pompous supergroups [and] disgusting, self-indulgent solos that went on for half an hour," Numan said. Before the rental company took the synth back, Numan messed around with it. "Luckily for me the synth had been left on a heavy setting, which produced the most powerful, ground-shaking sound I had ever heard."

Following this revelation, Tubeway Army's debut album abruptly swerved from its guitars-only conception to an electronically turbocharged New Wave. This was a transitional sound, hard rock with a futuristic sheen, rooted in the clean punchy riffs of glam. "I was just a guitarist that played keyboards," Numan said. "I just turned punk songs into electronic songs." The Moog sound was fat and doomy, not so far from the down-tuned bombast of Black Sabbath,

and the way Tubeway Army's music *moved* had nothing to do with the sequenced pulse beat of Moroder. On *Replicas*, the group's breakthrough album, the rhythm section was human and potent, with Numan playing guitar as well as keyboards. The next album, *The Pleasure Principle*—which was released under Numan's name—upped the futurism and abandoned guitars for synths. Numan still avoided programmed rhythm, however, working with a bass guitarist and flesh-and-blood drummer. Numan's music *rocked*, and even when it didn't, it possessed an almost symphonic grandeur. Just listen to the chillingly beautiful "Down in the Park," a sort of dystopian power ballad.

Critics, possibly disconcerted by the way he bypassed the music press en route to the top of the charts, unjustly pegged Numan as a Bowie clone. They sourced his image in Bowie's aristocratic alien from *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and his sound in *Low*. But what he actually derived from Bowie was the art of creative synthesis—or as Numan put it with characteristic and admirable frankness, "plagiarism"—weaving together an original identity out of pilfered bits and bobs. He also inherited glam rock's penchant for theater and spectacle. Punk's "antihero thing" and back-to-basics simplicity were "against everything I've ever wanted to do," Numan explained. He didn't believe in "being the same as the audience." He liked distance, a literal gulf between the stage and the crowd. His tours featured stunning lighting, set design, and even robots. "Showbiz for showbiz's sake more than anything," Numan explained. "I think I'm just taking it back to cabaret."

Numan had no time for social realism or everyday subjects, instead adapting his lyrics from a science-fiction novel he'd tried to write. The saga concerned a city in the near future administered by a "wise" megacomputer originally created by humans to bring their society back from the brink of anarchy. The machine decides that humans are actually the problem and embarks on a secret program of elimination. Numan's lyrics feature a menagerie of "types." The "friends" of "Are 'Friends' Electric" are cyborg buddies or sexpals. The Grey Men perform the IQ tests that determine who gets culled first. The Crazies are guerrillas hip to the Machine's master scheme who fight back.

Lost to all but the most hard-core Numanoids, the details of this dystopian metropolis weren't important so much as the moods— isolation, paranoia, emotional disconnection, hints of sexual confusion—conjured by the song scenarios. In his autobiography, *Praying to the Aliens*, Numan discussed the way *Replicas* teems "with images of decay, seediness, drug addicts, fragile people and the abandonment of morals. The bisexual allusions are partly based on encounters I had with gay men, most of who were much older than me, who had

attempted to persuade me to try things. I was never interested in gay sex...but the seediness of those situations left an impression which I used in *Replicas*."

Beyond the futuristic sound and imagery, what really hooked Numan's legion of fans was the vulnerability. Gary's sullen pout and wounded eyes made for a perfect pinup in the classic teenybop tradition. Numan had transgender appeal. Girls could dream of thawing the iceman, bringing him back to life. Boys could identify with his loneliness, allegorized in songs such as "M.E.," in which Numan sang from the point of view of "the last living machine" on an Earth where all the people have died. "Its own power source is running down. I used to have a picture in my mind of this sad and desperately alone machine standing in a desert-like wasteland, just waiting to die."

Teen dreams of *technoir* alienation, *Replicas* and *The Pleasure Principle* were like cartoon versions of Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* and *Closer*. But Numan's true contemporary parallel and inspiration was the far less revered Ultravox. Despite having a fairly fierce sound, Ultravox's artifice and mannerism sat uneasily with punk, and critics generally wrote them off as glam Johnny-come-latelies. Guitars dominated their sound at first, but by 1978's synth-laden *Systems of Romance*, they verged on a kind of electropunk. Numan was listening and taking notes.

What really made Ultravox crucial precursors of 1980's synthpop explosion was their European aura and singer/lyricist John Foxx's frigid imagery of dehumanization and decadence. He told *ZigZag* that the group's style was based in rejecting rock's standard "Americanisms." Billy Currie, the band's keyboardist, was a classically trained viola player, and he determinedly avoided blues scales. "We feel European," said Foxx, when *NME* asked why they'd recorded *Systems* with Kraftwerk producer Conny Plank at his studio near Köln. "The sort of background and melodies we tend to come out with just seemed to be Germanic even before we came here." As for the atmosphere of numb anomie and alienated sexuality, Ultravox laid it all on the table with the debut's manifesto-like "I Want to Be a Machine" and "MySex," which bore the heavy imprint of J. G. Ballard's *Crash*. "MySex is a spark of electro flesh," sings Foxx, "A neon outline on a high-rise overspill...skyscraper shadows on a car-crash overpass..."

After three unsuccessful major-label albums, Ultravox were in an even worse place than Human League, and at the end of 1978, Island dropped them. Foxx went solo and totally synthetic, abandoning not just guitars but real drums, too. On his debut solo album, *Metamatic*, Foxx developed the cinematic (and cinephile) quality already

glimpsed in Ultravox songs such as “Hiroshima Mon Amour.” The imagistic lyrics resembled fragments torn from an avant-garde screenplay: “A flicker of flashback, background dissolves...Underneath the green arcade/A blurred girl.” Foxx’s unveiling as a solo artist coincided with Numania, and benefited from it. The singles “Underpass,” “No One Driving,” and “Burning Car” dented the lower end of the pop charts, but Foxx didn’t achieve anything comparable to the success of his young admirer.

Meanwhile, two other former members of Ultravox, Billy Currie and guitarist Robin Simon, had stumbled on an entire scene based around electronic music and the romance of all things European and cinematic. After being junked by Island and ditched by Foxx, Currie and Simon drowned their sorrows at a Soho nightspot called Billy’s where Rusty Egan deejayed a weekly event called A Club for Heroes. Bowie was the patron saint. His “Heroes” defined the musical mood of grandeur and decay, while his wardrobe of images and personae set the fashion tone somewhere at the intersection of aristocracy, androgyny, and alien. Egan’s soundtrack mixed the Berlin sound of Bowie and Iggy with Moroder, Kraftwerk, early U.K. electropop such as “Being Boiled” and “Warm Leatherette,” and new synthpop outfits such as Belgium’s Telex and Japan’s Yellow Magic Orchestra. When the party moved to a larger venue called the Blitz, its crowd became known as Blitz Kids.

At the core of the scene was Egan’s flatmate, Steve Strange. He was the club’s doorman, weeding out the riffraff and preserving the atmosphere of in-crowd elitism, while his ever changing image defined the Blitz Kid style as a blend of retro (bolero hats, toy-soldier coats, Russian cummerbunds, pillbox hats) and futuristic (geometric haircuts, stylized makeup that turned the face into an abstract canvas). Strange soon became the front man of Visage, a confederacy of punk failures looking for a second shot at stardom. Founding member Egan had drummed in the Rich Kids, the much hyped but unsuccessful group formed by Glen Matlock after leaving the Sex Pistols. Another Rich Kid, Midge Ure, played guitar. Filling out the lineup were Ultravox’s Billy Currie on keyboards and violin and no less than *three* members—keyboardist Dave Formula, guitarist John McGeoch, bassist Barry Adamson—of Magazine, another postpunk band that had failed to deliver on high expectations. Strange had the least impressive résumé of the lot, his sole exploit to date being a brief involvement with a punk outfit tastelessly named the Moors Murderers who’d garnered a few outraged tabloid headlines.

Visage’s timing was perfect. The Blitz scene was the vanguard of a general shift in pop culture back toward fantasy and escapism. Strange described the new breed—now confusingly known as New Romantics,

Futurists, and Blitz Kids—as “people who work nine to five and then go out and live their fantasies. They’re glad to be dressed up and escaping work and all the greyness and depression.” Yet for all its brisk electrodisco rhythms, Visage’s music was sepia toned and at times almost funereal, with Strange’s vocals exuding a fey sadness. The hit singles “Fade to Grey” and “The Damned Don’t Cry” both conjured what Mark Fisher called “the Euro-aesthete’s ‘exhaustion from life.’” The effect was compounded by the band’s videos, which evoked a between-the-wars desolation derived from *Cabaret*. With impeccable timing, Bowie staged a comeback in the late summer of 1980 with his number one hit “Ashes to Ashes,” which tapped into the same mood of washed-out and washed-up melancholy and used a similar European electronic sound, as if to remind everybody he’d done it first with side two of *Low*. Steve Strange, looking like a Pierrot, made an appearance in the “Ashes” video.

As Bowie had done with *Low*, instead of looking westward toward America, the heartland of rock ‘n’ roll, for inspiration, the New Romantics pointedly turned their gaze to the East. This meant Germany, obviously, but also Russia. Visage wrote a song titled “Moon over Moscow,” while Spandau Ballet, the other major group on the Blitz scene, plunged into Cossack/constructivist kitsch with their single “Musclebound.” Although he later sang with a glutinously overstated “soulfulness,” at this point vocalist Tony Hadley’s operatic and Teutonic emoting bore scant relation to black music. Picking up on the reference to Spandau—site of a prison in western Berlin where Nazi leaders such as Rudolf Hess and Albert Speer had been condemned—and the neoclassical marble torso on the cover of their debut album, *Journeys to Glory*, the neofascist magazine *Bulldog* hailed Spandau as fine exponents of “musclebound, Nordic” art. *Journeys* also featured a brief sleeve note that struck a Nietzschean tone of beauty as cruelty:

Picture angular glimpses of sharp youth cutting strident shapes through the curling gray of 3-AM. Hear the soaring joy of immaculate rhythms, the sublime glow of music for heroes driving straight to the heart of dance. Follow the stirring vision and the rousing sound on the path towards journeys to glory.

The Spandau ethos was openly elitist. Their early gigs were word-of-mouth-only events in unusual places. New Romanticism, for Spandau, represented a natural aristocracy, the collective narcissism of a self-appointed few. As Hadley crooned on their first hit, “To Cut a Long Story Short,” “I am beautiful and clean and so very very young.”

Spandau Ballet’s dalliance with the Eurosynth sound was short-

lived, though, and the group quickly reverted to their soul-boy roots, venerating black American music above all else and producing, by way of tribute, a series of stilted funk records. Meanwhile, Ultravox—re-formed by Currie and with Midge Ure as its new singer—plunged into full-blown Teutonica with the quasi-classical “Vienna.” Wreathed in the sonic equivalent of dry ice, this ludicrously portentous ballad—inspired by a vague notion of a past-its-prime Hapsburg Empire sliding into decadence—reached number two on the U.K. charts in the first weeks of 1981 and hovered there for what seemed like an eternity.

At one point a single man looked set to have all the key bands on the New Romantic scene—Visage, Spandau, and Ultravox—in his grasp. Martin Rushent, who’d produced New Wave groups such as the Stranglers and Buzzcocks for United Artists, was in the process of forming his own label, Genetic, and its London office happened to be directly above Blitz. Despite Rushent’s having zero fashion sense and a totally untrendy beard, he regularly hung out at the club. “It became just the hippest place on Earth,” Rushent recalls. “I remember seeing Spandau down there for the first time, and they just blew me away. They were all wearing tartan kilts, odd clothes and hair, but the music was brilliant.” Soon Spandau, Visage, and the reformed Ultravox were all lined up to sign to Rushent’s fledgling label. But turmoil at Radar, Genetic’s parent company, put the label in limbo, so Rushent urged the groups to seek separate deals of their own. In the meantime, he threw himself and a quarter million pounds into building a studio on the grounds of his home in the Berkshire countryside, complete with state-of-the-art equipment for making electronic music.

Between 1978 and 1980, synthesizers had become much more affordable and sophisticated. A prime example was the Wasp synth, which was dirt cheap at around two hundred pounds, lightweight enough to be easily transported (unlike the prog-era synths), and easy to use. The Wasp was the great democratizer when it came to electronic music. Equally significant was the arrival at the end of the 1970s of instruments that hugely expanded the potential of machine-made rhythm. The Linn Drum Computer, for instance, was the first programmable drum machine to feature sampled percussive timbres, and could therefore realistically simulate the sound of toms, kicks, snares, and cymbals. If you preferred a more hands-on, drummerly feel, you could use syn-drum pads such as those made by Simmons. Played manually in real time rather than programmed, they were touch responsive—the harder you hit, the louder they sounded. Each pad connected to its own module, allowing the user to switch between different drum timbres or feed the beat through effects to make it sound jarringly futuristic. The gimmicky, pinging sound of Simmons and similar syn-drums was smeared all over the early New Romantic

records. Even at the time, it had a curious, ultramodern yet already dated quality, a pre-echo of its status today as a sonic signifier for “early eighties.”

Rushent’s first stab at electropop using these new tools was with former Buzzcock front man Pete Shelley. The sound they developed was a transitional hybrid of guitar-based New Wave and electropop, heard at its best on the superb single “Homo Sapien.” Released in August 1981, “Homo Sapien” was a coded coming-out for Shelley. The single’s innuendos—the fruity way Shelley enunciates “homo sapien,” plus couplets like “homo superior/my interior”—provoked an unofficial ban from Radio One. By the time the singer’s solo album was released, another group had taken the Rushent electropop sound to the charts and stolen Shelley’s thunder.

In early 1981 Rushent had been called in to salvage the Human League’s career, then at its lowest point. After *Travelogue*, the group had become deadlocked by their inability to agree on a direction for the next album. Phil Oakey instigated the band’s splitting up, telling Martyn Ware, “We’re kicking you out of the group,” only to be thrown for a loop when Ian Craig Marsh decided to go with Ware to form a new venture called British Electric Foundation. Worse, the music press reacted to the split by deciding that Ware and Marsh were the real musical brains, writing off singer Oakey and visual projectionist Adrian Wright as the talentless rump.

The decision for Oakey and Wright to retain the name Human League made sense. There was an imminent European tour that had to be honored (lest they risk huge debts) and the strikingly coiffured singer was the memorable face of the band, its obvious star (if stardom ever came). In a sense, Oakey’s lopsided haircut had become the League’s logo. It took some finagling from manager Bob Last, though, to convince Oakey (who never liked the name) to keep operating as the Human League, and to convince Ware and Marsh (who did like it) to accept a payoff for loss of the brand. The deal was 1 percent of the take on the next album, which seemed merely symbolic, given the state of the band.

When they hooked up with Rushent, the Human League were demoralized and directionless. “They had no real material, just bits of ideas,” says Rushent, who’d been invited by Virgin to produce a potential single called “The Sound of the Crowd.” “I listened to the demo and said, ‘Well, that’s going in the bin, we’re starting again.’ Their spirits picked up hugely when we’d completed ‘Sound of the Crowd,’ because it did sound a hundred times better.”

“The Sound of the Crowd” was the first fruit of Oakey’s songwriting partnership with new Human League member Ian Burden. Formerly the bassist in an experimental Sheffield band named Graph,

Burden was an unlikely writer of pop hits. But “Sound of the Crowd” was an unlikely hit. “I still reckon that song is one of the maddest records that’s ever got in the Top Twenty,” says Oakey. “The whole thing runs on tom toms, but they’re synth toms, and it’s got very odd screaming sounds.” It also has a foreboding dub feel of bass pressure and cold cavernous space, which came from Burden’s being a reggae fiend.

“The Sound of the Crowd” featured backing vocals from two other new recruits, Joanne Catherall and Susanne Sulley. Oakey had spotted the teenage pair dancing during a “Futurist night” at Crazy Daisy, the club that had been the Sheffield glam youth’s focus since Roxy days. “I was really into Michael Jackson’s *Off the Wall* at that point and thought high voices were the way pop was going to go,” he recalls. “Martyn could do quite a nice high backing vocal in the old League, so with him out of the picture, I was thinking: ‘Do I know anyone who sings falsetto? No. Get a girl then.’ We auditioned four people, but Joanne and Susanne, being friends, were ideal because they could look after each other when the band was on tour.” That Joanne was darkly handsome and Sulley blondely pretty didn’t hurt in terms of the band’s visual chemistry either.

Oakey’s decision to recruit “the girls,” as they universally became known, was a genius move. As Jon Savage put it, when they plucked Catherall and Sulley off the dance floor at Crazy Daisy, the Human League literally let the crowd into their sound. Overnight, the League’s music opened up, became populist, and then popular. Shining through their provincial attempts at glamour, Catherall and Sulley’s ordinary-girl charm banished the old League’s cold-fish image and visually matched a shift in Oakey’s songwriting toward songs of everyday romance. Their amateurishness—“I can’t dance,” admitted Sulley in 2001, twenty years into her career with the League, “I’ve got no rhythm, we’re not particularly great singers”—made the League lovable for the first time. “That was a totally conscious thing on Philip’s part, he understood what he was doing when he got the girls to join,” says Last, who was extremely doubtful about the idea at first.

The rejuvenated League’s next two chart-busting singles, “Love Action” and “Open Your Heart,” were practically manifestos for this new humanized, not Numanized, direction in electropop. In a weird way, “Love Action” sounds like its title, pulsing and glistening, an iridescent affirmation. Yet for all its warmth and wetness, “Love Action” still retains something of the aberrant quality of “Sound of the Crowd,” making it an improbable smash hit. “It’s not got a proper chorus,” admits Oakey, explaining that “Love Action” is basically two different songs bolted together. The verses, from a song called “I Believe in Love,” are “confessional nonsense, what I was feeling at the

time,” while the angular, not-quite-a-chorus bit is from another song about watching Sylvia Kristel in the soft-core erotic movie *Emmanuelle*.

Rushent and Human League had become a hit-making dream team. “To a large extent I was their band,” says Rushent. “I was certainly their drummer, because I programmed all the rhythms and made all the decisions about the grooves.” He worked closely with Burden on the bass sound and with another new League member, multi-instrumentalist Jo Callis, on the song’s chord patterns. “One of the key things was that for the first time we had a proper band,” says Oakey. “In the old League we had four people who fiddled with a lot of things, but suddenly we had Martin who’d been a drummer, Ian Burden who played bass, and Jo Callis who’d been guitarist in the Rezillos and knew about chords.” Rushent’s varied background in recording was vital. He’d worked his way up from being a lowly tape operator, working with everybody from Shirley Bassey to Yes in the process. “Martin really knew what pop was,” says Oakey. “He could take your mad sounds and they’d still be mad sounds but he could put them in places that made them pop. Really horrible things come out of synthesizers and that’s what I like about them. But somehow Martin could make them work within a pop context, and I don’t know how he did it.”

Released in October 1981, *Dare* represented a perfect melding of tradition and innovation. “I’d learned a lot through working with the arranger Johnny Harris,” says Rushent. “He was bandleader for all the big-show singers like Petula Clark and Tom Jones. Through watching him work, I learned about voicing instruments and how the most important element of music is silence. Don’t clutter your arrangements, keep every instrumental part simple and ‘vocal,’ as if someone was singing it. If you listen to *Dare*, there’s lots of space in the songs and there’s loads of little parts, and you can sing them all. There’s so many bloody little sing-along bits and every one sticks in your head.”

Instead of an orchestra, though, Rushent, in tandem with Burden, Callis, and Oakey, was working with machines. One particular “magic machine” was especially crucial, the Roland Microcomposer, a combined synthesizer and sequencer that allowed the user to program in complicated and extended note patterns, and which came with a labor-saving “copy/insert” function that enabled the pasting of whole passages of music from one location in the piece to another. “Today the Microcomposer would be regarded as very primitive, and when you first grappled with it, the results sounded shitty,” recalls Rushent. “But if you really read the manual and studied what it was capable of doing and spent days mastering it, you could end up with a style of

playing that no one else had. Stuff that was impossible to duplicate in the live environment, all these little inflections, bends, and tonal changes. That's what was novel about Human League at the time, the ultimate precision. No one had heard that before. When it hit the dance floor, it was like this massive machine. The thing was right up people's backsides. But there's enough feeling in it so it doesn't sound like Kraftwerk, but like humans playing it."

From being an electropop band that made "No standard rock 'n' roll instrumentation" their manifesto, the Human League mutated into a pop group that just happened to use synths. Representing an ideal of quality pop with universal appeal, Abba was the group's new reference point. For *NME*'s Paul Morley, Human League represented a new middle of the road (M.O.R.) that was simultaneously postpunk and post-Abba. *Dare* could only have been made by a group who knew about Roxy, Iggy, and Kraftwerk, but their music had become inviting and accessible enough to win over the great unhip masses—moms and dads, teenyboppers, children, even grandma. The avant-M.O.R. tag made sense because *Dare*'s worldview and sentiments were positive, wholesome, and in some ways just a notch away from small-c conservative. "The Things That Dreams Are Made Of" saw Oakey rattling off a list of life-enhancing things over electronicized Glitterbeat: "Everybody needs love and adventure/Everybody needs cash to spend...Everybody needs two or three friends." "I Am the Law" turned the Clash's "I Fought the Law" inside out. It was a sympathetic song about authority and the police, inspired by Oakey's encounter with an injured bouncer back when he was working as a hospital porter. In interviews, Oakey rejected bohemian values (he was pro-marriage, antidrugs), and exalted a new spirit of professionalism and commitment to entertainment, saying "This new pride that I'm always talking about in pop music, *that* was destroyed by punk, the garage band ideal."

"Don't You Want Me" was Human League's most sonically conventional single yet, from its perky groove to its trim verse/chorus structure. It also further underlined the importance of Catherall and Sulley to the group. The Human League's biggest song ever was the one that gave the greatest prominence to the girls' unassuming vocals. A duet between Oakey and Sulley, it deliciously rewrites the story of how "the girls" were discovered and projects five years into the future. Oakey sings as the Svengali who plucks a girl from obscurity ("You were working as a waitress in a cocktail bar") and turns her into "someone new," only to be abandoned by his protégé lover now that she has the world at her feet. Defiant, if ever so slightly off pitch, Sulley (although in reality, it was Catherall who had become Oakey's girlfriend) sings as the provincial dreamer who always knew deep

down that she was destined for better things and is now determined to make her own path in life.

The “Don’t You Want Me” video added further layers of artifice. A Brechtian conundrum, it depicted the band making a promo, cutting between scenes from the video within a video and action off the set or in the editing suite, such as the band watching their own rushes. “I don’t know where that idea came from originally, whether it was Phil’s or the director Steve Barron’s,” says Bob Last. “But from the band’s point of view, a great deal of the appeal was that it was a film, shot on thirty-five millimeter, something that was extremely unusual in those very early days of the video industry. And that was a straightforwardly aspirational thing, the idea of doing a video with high production values. If you look at the promo, there’s a big film camera very prominent in it. And from a marketing standpoint it was very smart, because here were these girls in the band who really were just these ‘regular girls,’ now appearing in a *movie*.” A worldwide smash—Britain’s Christmas number one for 1981, it topped the charts in America the following summer—“Don’t You Want Me” propelled *Dare* to global sales of over five million. The Human League were Abba for all intents and purposes.

With the Human League leading the way, the peak of synthpop occurred during the winter of 1981–82. Close behind the Human League in the warm-blooded electropop stakes was Soft Cell, who scored a U.K. number one hit and crashed into the U.S. Top 10 with their torrid cover of the Northern soul classic “Tainted Love,” which was swiftly followed by the U.K. hits “Bedsitter” and “Say Hello Wave Goodbye.” Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark, a highly melodic if increasingly pretentious synth duo from Liverpool, scored three U.K. Top 5 hits in a row (two of them, bizarrely, about Joan of Arc). The U.K. Top 10 was also haunted by Japan’s electronic torch song “Ghosts,” Ultravox’s interminable “Vienna,” and a couple of deceptively lightweight ditties by Depeche Mode.

By the spring of 1982, electronic pop was so dominant in Britain that the Musicians Union made an attempt to limit the use of synthesizers. “They seriously proposed the idea of rationing synthesizers, restricting them to certain recommended studios where they could be used to duplicate string parts,” says Ian Craig Marsh. “Which sounds ludicrous, almost Stalinesque. But they wanted to protect the jobs of orchestras.”

Synthpop was treated with equal suspicion in certain quarters of the rock scene. “It’s not experimenting at all, it’s just using synthesizers to play pretty ordinary songs a lot of the time,” jeered Pete De Freitas of Liverpool postpunkers Echo and the Bunnymen. “A lot of these kids just don’t have talent,” added bassist Les Pattinson.

“Any farmyard horse can kick a synth.” Perhaps he meant to say “any clotheshorse,” given that, as per the Undertones’ “My Perfect Cousin,” synthesizers were associated with effete poseurs. Conversely, it was precisely the instrument’s symbolic coding as effeminate and unrock that appealed both to synth users and synthpop fans. Compared to the phallic guitar, the synth was for gender benders: Oakey with his lipstick, eyeliner, and asymmetric hair hanging long and girly down one side of his face; Soft Cell’s Marc Almond in his pervy black leather; skirt-wearing Martin Gore from Depeche Mode; Eurythmics’ singer Annie Lennox and her crop-haired, androgynous-dominatrix image.

In America, attitudes toward synths were even more polarized. For many heavy-metal fans, keyboards were innately queer, their presence immediately signifying the ruination of “real” metal. For other Americans, being into “English haircut bands” and “art fag” music served as an empowering act of cultural treason. If you grew up feeling different in an American high school during the eighties, surrounded by Mötley Crüe fans, with the only homegrown underground being hardcore punk’s alterna-jock muscularity, then the sole alternative was to look toward England and to become a fan of groups such as Depeche Mode. Since David Bowie’s emergence, if not earlier, there was a real sense in which “English” connoted “gay” in the American rock imagination. This explains not just Anglophobia but Anglophilia, too. For those alienated by the overbearing masculinity of mainstream American rock, England beckons as an imaginary haven, a utopia of androgyny. In the early eighties, gay or sexually ambiguous boys, plus a good number of girls, were attracted to British electropop, not least because the bands were generally full of pretty boys wearing makeup.

Japan could have been the ultimate Anglo art fag nightmare as far as heartland rockers were concerned. Yet far from living in some paradise for dandy aesthetes and members of the third gender, Japan were rebelling against the mundane realities of urban Britain, which could be just as hostile to the art minded and androgynous as those of any blue-collar town in America. The son of a rat catcher, singer David Sylvian grew up in dreary Catford on the edge of southeast London. “It was disguise, a mask to hide behind,” Sylvian said of his white-makeup face and platinum-blond wedge-cut hair. “The music was a mask as well. It says nothing about how I was, other than I was hiding, trying desperately to be anything but myself. Just because I thought that was the only way I could survive.” Even the name Sylvian was masquerade, inspired by Syl Sylvain of the cross-dressing New York Dolls. The singer’s real surname, Batt, couldn’t have been less exotic or more pathetically English. His brother Steve, who played

drums in Japan, called himself Steve Jansen, after Dolls singer David Johansen.

Japan arrived on the U.K. music scene just in time for punk, which transformed everything to their disadvantage. The music press ridiculed them as behind-the-curve glamsters and mocked Sylvian's croon as second-rate Bryan Ferry. Gradually, Japan developed an arresting and distinctive post-Roxy sound built around exotic synth textures and Mick Karn's languid fretless bass. Japan's records sounded as exquisite as Sylvian and his bandmates looked. In performance, the singer mesmerized listeners with his excessive poise and composure, a statuesque quality that carried through to his ultrastylized vocals and the immaculately made-up blank white facade of his face. Simon Frith could have been talking about Sylvian when he wrote about Bowie's "art of posing." He "wasn't sexy like most pop idols. His voice and body were aesthetic not sensual objects; he expressed semi-detached bedroom fantasies, boys' arty dreams...an individual grace that showed up everyone else as clods."

As expressed most thoroughly in the music and life of Bryan Ferry, the art rock dream is achieving an aristocratic existence, dedicated to beauty: collecting and cherishing antiques and objets d'art, visiting exotic places, feasting your eyes. There's a hierarchic impulse underlying art rock's obsession with distinction and perfection, and this often takes on an unnerving right-wing flavor. Following in Bowie's dandy footsteps, Japan exhibited a fascination for the former Axis powers—in songs like "Suburban Berlin," "Nightporter" (inspired by the Dirk Bogarde as Nazi-in-hiding movie), and the name Japan itself—and for other well-ordered societies. They wrote a song called "Communist China" and another called "Rhodesia," surely the only pop tune ever written about this postcolonial white-power pariah of the civilized world!

Too refined for the crass self-mythologization of New Romanticism, Japan nonetheless benefited as pop culture began to shift in a neoglam direction. Almost overnight, they became incredibly hip. Critical praise began to accumulate around the "Art of Parties" single, turning into an avalanche for *Tin Drum*, a loose concept album about Mao's China. "Ghosts," an electronic ballad eerily shaded with fluttering synths but devoid of a beat or bassline, went Top 10, setting up a compelling *Top of the Pops* appearance, with the still, pale Sylvian drawing the world into his hush.

"Too fragile to fuck" is how Paul Morley described Sylvian. Soft Cell's Marc Almond was fragile, too, but in a different way: wonderfully uncool and hyperemotional. His vocal pitch wavered, the intonation was often excessive, but Almond's all too human passion burst through. Like the League, Soft Cell had no truck with the we-are-

robots shtick of first-wave electropop. Their songs nestled in the gap between glitzy dreams and squalid English realities. "I like to mix personal experiences with film images and then exaggerate them," Almond declared.

Almond was studying art at Leeds Polytechnic when he met fellow student David Ball, initially enlisting him to provide the soundtrack for Almond's cabaret-like art performances. Although Ball played Soft Cell's synths, it was Almond who was the real scholar of electronic music. The duo's music emerged from the collision of Almond's electronic taste and Ball's background as a fan of Northern soul and orchestrated sixties pop such as Burt Bacharach. Almond deejayed synthetic dance pop at the Leeds Warehouse nightclub, the epicenter of the Leeds branch of the Futurist/New Romantic scene. He particularly loved Suicide, especially the neon-twinkling textures of the duo's second album, which was more lushly textured and synthetic than their classic lo-fi debut. Soft Cell essentially transposed Suicide's glamorous and dirty New York vibe to provincial England. "Bedsitter," the group's second huge U.K. hit, documented Almond's lifestyle, alternating between his cramped flat in Leeds's red-light district and the hollow glitz of the New Romantic fantasy as enacted weekly at the Warehouse club. He told *Sounds*, "I used to wonder about these really glamorous people: what do they look like doing the dishes?" For their debut album, *Non-Stop Erotic Cabaret*, Soft Cell voyaged to New York to soak up the scuzz, recording songs such as "Seedy Films" and "Sex Dwarf" in a studio near Times Square. If that first album played up the sleaze to an almost cartoonish degree, the 1983 follow-up, *The Art of Falling Apart*, deepened Almond's obsession with beautiful losers into a harrowed empathy for the broken and discarded of this world.

Innocuous and innocent, Depeche Mode initially seemed like the antithesis of Soft Cell. Originally a guitar group made up of punk fans, they'd bought synths, built up a songbook of winsome and dinky-sounding electropop ditties, and shunned major-label offers in favor of a 50/50 profit-splitting deal with Mute Records. Their jaunty singles "New Life" and "Just Can't Get Enough" raced up the charts and won them a teenybop following. Gradually, over the course of eighteen months or so, the music made by the pretty boys from the suburban town of Basildon started to sound more haunting. Martin Gore, the main songwriter, took to wearing a leather skirt and displayed a keen interest in all things transgressive. Depeche Mode also developed a burgeoning political consciousness that was unusual in the realm of synthpop.

The first sign of this newly committed Depeche came with the 1983 single "Everything Counts," which combined hard electro beats, wisps of bleak melody, and clumsy if heartfelt anti-Thatcher

sentiments: "The grabbing hands grab all they can...It's a competitive world." It was their biggest hit to date. The accompanying album, *Construction Time Again*, featured a hammer, symbolic of workers' power, on its cover. Over the next year, Depeche Mode almost methodically worked their way through the big issues. "Love in Itself" was a Gang of Four-style critique of romantic love as distraction/consolation for life in an unjust world: "There was a time when all of my mind was love/Now I find that most of the time/Love's not enough, in itself." "People Are People," another big hit in both the U.K. and America, dealt with racism, homophobia, and every other kind of bigotry and intolerance. Genuinely pained perplexity seared through the painful doggerel of "People are people so why should it be/You and I should get along so awfully?" "Blasphemous Rumours" lugubriously accused God of having "a sick sense of humor." The pervy pop smash "Master and Servant" came adorned with metal-bashing noises (very chic thanks to the German outfit Einstürzende Neubauten). Gore had been exposed to Neubauten's "steel symphonies" and power-tool performances during a sojourn in Berlin, where he'd explored the city's seedy demimonde of S&M and bondage clubs—an inspiration for "Master and Servant." But the song also contained a political resonance, in the sly line "forget all about equality."

Depeche Mode had originally been attracted to Mute because of Daniel Miller's roster of arty electronic weirdos such as Fad Gadget and the ultraintense German band Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft (which translates as "German American Friendship"). Like Soft Cell, D.A.F. were art school boys with a kinky homoerotic image and a post-Moroder pulse-disco sound. Daniel Miller loved the fact that "they weren't relying on past rock traditions at all, which is the criterion of what goes on Mute." Renegades against what singer Gabi Delgado called "Anglo-American pop imperialism," D.A.F.'s early sound was jagged and chaotic, a real electropunk assault. "They were part of a small but active Düsseldorf scene, little clubs and performance art things," recalls Miller. "Robert Görl was an electronic musician's dream of a drummer, because he was so minimal. The guttural way Gabi sang sounded very threatening." The group moved to London and recorded a brilliant and sinister second album for Mute, *Die Kleinen und die Bosen* [The Small and the Evil]. After its release, the group shrank down to just Delgado and Görl, who stripped D.A.F.'s music down to a brutalist Eurodisco, signed to Virgin, and released a staggering trilogy of albums that made them critical darlings in the U.K. and actual pop stars in Germany.

The new streamlined D.A.F. espoused techno-primitivism. "Most bands get a synthesizer and their first idea is to tune it!" Görl told

Melody Maker. "They want a clean normal sound. They don't work with the *power* you get from a synthesizer.... We want to bring together this high technique with body power so you have the past time mixed with the future." Delgado exalted disco as "body music" and rejected rock rhythms as "too boring and static....[D.A.F.'s] music is very mighty." D.A.F.'s cult of muscularity strayed into that ambiguous zone where fascist-leaning futurism and communist-leaning constructivism collide in an aestheticization of physical perfection and physical force. "They were influenced by a group of artists known as Die Junge Wilden [the Young Wild]," says Chris Bohn, the *NME* journalist who championed D.A.F. and other early eighties German art punk groups such as Neubauten. "They were into deliberately taunting the German mediocracy by tackling Nazi and sex taboos head on, part of the confrontation being in the seemingly ambiguous use of Nazi imagery/references." D.A.F. broached this dodgy terrain with songs such as "Der Mussolini" with its chorus of "Dance der Mussolini/Dance der Adolf Hitler."

"Der Mussolini" and their first Virgin album, *Alles Ist Gut* [All Is Good], sold hundreds of thousands of copies in Germany in 1981, making D.A.F. the fifth-biggest German-speaking pop group in the country and the focus of much media controversy. Even Delgado's sinister vocal style seemed too evocative of Germany's recent past, as he himself acknowledged. "The singing isn't like rock 'n' roll or pop singing. It's sometimes like in a Hitler speech, not a Nazi thing, but it's in the German character, that *crack! crack! crack!* way of speaking." For D.A.F., German's precise speech rhythms fit better with their strict rhythmic regime of sequenced synth pulses. English sounded too relaxed.

Far from being fascists, though, D.A.F. were erotic renegades in the tradition of Genet, de Sade, and Bataille. They flirted with forbidden imagery only because they refused to recognize *any* taboos. Delgado was fascinated with sadomasochism and other forms of fetishistic sexuality deemed "perverse" because they're unconnected to reproduction. "Lust is always non-productive," he proclaimed. "If you go over the top in lovemaking it gets too much and you are no more able to work. And criminals are obviously anti-social. I'm really interested in these things that are not fulfilling economic functions." *Gold und Liebe* [Gold and Love], the second Virgin album, touched on an alchemical theme, the notion that instead of chasing the profane gold of material wealth, the true quest is for gold of the spirit. It was D.A.F., not Spandau Ballet, who were the real New Romantics, from their un-American sound (they inspired a whole genre of music called Electronic Body Music) to their cult of youth, evident in lyrics such as "You are beautiful and young and strong/Run to waste your youth."

The irony of Anglo-Euro synthpop is that for all its whiteness(D.A.F. loved disco, but prided themselves on not sounding black) it had a huge impact on black America. D.A.F. and their offshoot group Liaisons Dangereuses influenced the embryonic black electronic sounds of Chicago house and Detroit techno, while Kraftwerk almost single-handedly inspired New York electro. “Whenever we did anything that moved toward mainstream American success, it was notable that it had close connections with the black music market,” says Bob Last. “Like Human League’s success with *Dare* in America, a crucial part of that was black radio stations in New York picking up on the record.”

Dare’s fat synth bass and crisp Linn drumbeats paralleled the electrofunk music played on New York stations like Kiss, where tracks were undergoing radical remixing and being montaged into seamless segues that lasted half an hour or longer. Already aware of remixing’s potential, Martin Rushent introduced a dublike spaciousness to records by the Human League and his other protégés, Altered Images. Now he suggested making an instrumental version of *Dare*, hoping to showcase his production skills to the hilt and establish a new benchmark for electronic dance pop.

Credited to the League Unlimited Orchestra—a cute nod to Barry White’s instrumental project, the Love Unlimited Orchestra—*Love and Dancing* was released in June 1982 at a special cheap price (the band didn’t want to rip off the fans). The back cover pointedly depicted the entire team behind the making of *Dare*, with photos of Rushent, studio engineer Dave Allen, even sleeve designer Ken Ansell, as well as the band members. “They *had* to have a picture of me, I did the whole thing on my own!” chuckles Rushent. “But I never got any writing royalties on it. In retrospect I should have.”

A masterpiece of mixing-board wizardry, *Love and Dancing* took thousands of man-hours to assemble. Rushent created complicated vocal stutter effects by hand, cutting up tiny bits of tape and then “gluing them together until you’d got that stuttering ‘t-t-t-t’ effect.” By the end of the process, the master tape of *Love and Dancing* contained so many splices—2,200 main edits, and around 400 further small edits—that it was dangerously close to disintegration. “You couldn’t fast-forward it or fast-rewind it, so the first thing I did was copy the album onto another tape before the original master fell apart.” Making *Love and Dancing*, says Rushent, “was the most creative experience I’ve ever had in my life, and something that’s been very difficult to top. That may be why I gave up record production not so long afterwards. It’s like those astronauts who go to the moon and come back and go a bit loopy. You’ve walked on the moon, what you gonna do now?”

The Human League, too, were on top of the world and feeling

disoriented. “Almost the worst days of our lives have been when we’ve been told we’re number one,” says Oakey. “I remember smashing the phone after I was told ‘Don’t You Want Me’ had reached number one in America. It’s so much to live up to. And when you’re number one nobody really *cares* about you anymore. Everyone and their grandma knows about you, so no one wants to wear your badges anymore.”

By the end of 1982, the deluge of synthpop groups—Brits like Thomas Dolby, Eurythmics, Blancmange, Tears For Fears, Kajagoogoo, plus a few American outfits, too, such as Berlin and Our Daughter’s Wedding—had diluted the impact of electronics. Soft Cell’s David Ball correctly predicted an antisynth backlash in response to the surplus of weak electropop. In a weird twist, the only way forward for pioneers such as Soft Cell and the Human League was to start incorporating *traditional* instruments into their sound. Accordingly, the Human League’s big post-*Dare* hit single, “(Keep Feeling) Fascination,” discreetly featured some electric guitar, signaling the abandonment of the band’s synths-only policy. It was the end of an era.

THE PIONEERS OF NEW POP

POSTPUNK NEARLY KILLED GREEN. Or at least that's what it *felt* like. "It was the whole ambulance with the sirens going to hospital thing," Green recalls, queasily, of that night in early 1980 when he collapsed with what appeared to be a heart attack. Scritti Politti had played Brighton in support of Gang of Four. In a 1982 *Sounds* feature, Simon Dwyer, a journalist friend of Scritti's, recalled the aftermath of the gig. "The group and I succumbed to heavy drink and heavy conversation and slept on a friend's floor. All except for Green, who was still asking for pills of a dubious nature well into the morning. A few hours later, Green lay seriously ill in hospital." It turned out not to be a coronary but a literally crippling anxiety attack, a psychosomatic paralysis that left him incapable of speech for a terrifying four hours.

Although the stresses of performing contributed (Green had always suffered from frightful stage nerves), the collapse mostly stemmed from chronic lifestyle dysfunction. "I was living without bothering to look after myself at all," Green recalled. "Which seemed an appropriate thing to do at the time, but it creeps up on you without you noticing until you're in a hospital bed with people leaning over asking you what you've eaten recently and you realize that you haven't eaten anything recently. They ask you where you live and you realize it's a shit-hole and they ask you when you last slept and you haven't slept for ages. They asked if I had anything worrying me and *everything* was worrying me."

A postpunk excess of drinking, thinking, and speeding brought Scritti as a whole, and Green in particular, to the brink of breakdown. "We were a sick group for some time," Green recalled. "I used to read and write a lot, which was the only thing I did apart from being debauched and drinking too much." In addition to the group's debilitating lifestyle—"We partied very hard, as they say nowadays," Green admits—there's also a sense in which Scritti's imperative to question everything turned toxic. "Finding minutiae overburdened with potential significance, this can contaminate your whole life to the point where you might describe it as mental illness," Green notes wryly. "Not that I was actually bonkers, but..."

When Green's estranged parents read about their son's hospitalization in *NME*, they set him up in a South Wales cottage to recuperate. However, instead of resting his overtaxed brain, the singer embarked on a massive rethinking of the Scritti project. Shortly before his collapse there'd been tension in the band when Green broached the idea of moving in a more pop direction. He'd been listening to

contemporary black dance pop such as Michael Jackson's *Off the Wall* and investigating the history of soul music, from Aretha Franklin to Stax. Green had also been absorbing the ideas of Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and other French post-Marxist theorists.

After the disillusionment of 1968, radical French thought had undergone a kind of implosion. It didn't exactly become depoliticized, but certainly the lion's share of its subversive energy was channeled into the academy. There, Derrida and his *confreres* beaverishly gnawed at the roots of Western thought, toppling ideas of progress, reason, truth, and the like. Absorbing the implications of the new French theories, Green gradually lost his faith in Marxism as a "science of history" that mapped the righteous path to a future society of justice and equality. Without the anchor of stable values, he found himself adrift in a world of uncertainty, where all meaning was provisional because nothing could be "proved" to be correct. It was scary, but exhilarating.

Derrida's corrosive influence also eroded other concepts that underpinned the old Scritti Politti, such as the idea of the marginal versus the mainstream. Dissatisfied with the self-conscious "quirkiness and idiosyncrasy" of early Scritti, Green was determined to extricate his trapped pop sensibility from the thorny tangles of the Scritti sound. He hadn't totally abandoned the idea of subversion, but his ideas of how that might work became more oblique and subtle. He envisioned a strategy of unsettling and undoing (deconstruction, the French called it) that took place inside the very language of pop. Instead of searching for some alternative zone of authentic purity and truth that supposedly existed outside the conventional forms, Green decided, it might be more productive to work within those structures. Rather than avoiding the love song altogether, it might be possible to locate and accentuate the internal contradictions and tautologies that already limned what Barthes called the "lover's discourse."

It says something about how old habits die hard that Green felt it necessary to generate copious amounts of text in order to convince his band of the righteousness of his new Scritti vision. One suspects that the exercise was as much for Green's sake as for the others. "I sat down for months and months and wrote screeds of justification," Green recalls. "There was that sense of having to have it understood, approved, and thought through by the group." The band came down to Wales to read the book's worth of cogitation and were ultimately swayed to Green's new pop vision. By the end of 1980 Scritti had worked up a new sound based around old soul, new funk, and the soft, slick reggae style known as lover's rock.

The first publicly aired work by the reborn Scritti was "The Sweetest Girl," which Green described as "a perversion and an

extension of Lover's Rock." True to its title, the single was sweet enough to induce a diabetic coma. Green crooned soft and high like Gregory Isaacs mixed with Al Green, over a gently pulsing rhythm section of crisp drum machine and tender but steadfast bass. Green's hero Robert Wyatt dusted the luscious confection with ethereal flickers of reggae-style keyboards. To fans of the DIY-era Scritti, the new sound was shocking, yet strangely logical. Now that Scritti's anxious compulsion to avoid conventional structures was gone, Green's melodic genius gushed forth in a flood of pure loveliness, but there was still a lingering undertone of the old Scritti's harmonic eeriness to put a tang of bitter in the sweet.

"The 'Sweetest Girl'" sounded like a hit record, and a hit was what Green had his heart set on. Lots of hits. If "the margin" was no longer a valid concept, then the mainstream was the place that pop meaning gets made and unmade (Derrida-style). In 1978, Green critiqued the competitive structure of the charts and the record industry, but now he wanted to be top of the pops.

In spring 1981, "The 'Sweetest Girl'" got its public unveiling as the opening track of *C81*, a cassette compilation pulled together by Rough Trade and *NME* to celebrate five years of the label and, by extension, the first half decade of the independent-label revolution. An absolute bargain at one pound and fifty pence, *C81*'s lineup included such postpunk luminaries as Pere Ubu, Cabaret Voltaire, Subway Sect, and the Raincoats. Thirty thousand readers sent away for it. Yet *C81* was in many ways postpunk's swan song. The epoch it defined was crumbling. Many of the featured artists, such as Postcard's Orange Juice and Aztec Camera, had already broken with independent consensus. They sounded shiny, accessible, and ambitious. A few weeks before *C81* was announced, *NME*'s last issue of 1980 looked to the future with a Paul Morley feature that essentially constituted a manifesto for "New Pop," a shared ambition and urgency he detected among emerging groups who believed it was both possible and imperative to take on the mainstream and beat it at its own game. Of the three bands covered, Sheffield's ABC were the most stridently confident. Originally an electronic outfit in the mold of Cabaret Voltaire, they'd recently traded in their frigid synths and oscillators for funky rhythm guitars and real drums, and changed their name from Vice Versa to ABC. Guitarist Mark White talked about pursuing a "funk vision" and described disco as "an excellent vehicle." Watching the independent charts become "saturated with rubbish," ABC decided that the mainstream was where the action was.

Morley may have coined the term, but "New Pop" as a concept had multiple authors. Bob Last and the Human League, and Alan Horne and Orange Juice could all claim a role in hatching the idea.

Liverpool's Zoo label also talked of aiming for the charts and touted a bunch of bright, tuneful groups (such as the Teardrop Explodes) as an antidote to monochrome postpunk. As the sensibility took hold, New Pop defined itself through a set of overlapping values: health, cleanliness, mobility, ambition. Decrying the "unhealthy" state of independent rock in countless interviews, Green seemed to transpose his own physical ill-being during the squatland Scritti days onto postpunk as a whole. ABC's singer Martin Fry talked of "cleaning up the whole idea of pop music." As for mobility, postpunk culture was increasingly characterized by critics and musicians alike in terms of inertia, stagnation, and wallowing. Writing about 1981's third Futurama festival, Morley recoiled aghast from groups that "twitched in the slime," while Green lamented the independent sector's degeneration into "a boggy ground, a wilderness."

Green pointed to the homemade-cassette network as particularly lamentable. "Many people tried to sell ridiculous music, filled with irritating noises and failed attempts at music," he told *Vinyl*. It was time for a return to quality control, the hierarchy of the gifted over the talentless. In August 1980, *NME* had started the regular news column "Garageland," which covered the cassette scene and vinyl releases so small-scale they didn't even have independent distribution but were sold through mail order. Just ten months later, "Garageland" was closed down. Across the board, critics abruptly lost patience with the sonic mannerisms that only recently indicated charming eccentricity or honorable amateurism. Now they signified only a chronic lack of ambition.

Scritti Politti started out championing the do-it-yourself movement, but now Green renounced it as a lost cause. Still, Scritti didn't immediately embrace the "entryist" logic of signing to a major label in order to better infiltrate the mainstream. They stayed on Rough Trade, but they moved to distance themselves from DIY's "squattage industry" (as Green put it) in the way that they presented their music. Scritti's early DIY releases came wrapped in hand-folded sleeves made from smudged photocopies of litter and old bottle caps. The new Scritti singles copied the stylish packaging of deluxe commodities: Dunhill cigarettes with "The 'Sweetest Girl,'" Dior Eau Sauvage fragrance with its follow-up "Faithless," and so forth. Green talked of admiring the "cheap classiness" of commonly available consumer disposables. "Our covers are now made in Turin by robots!" he boasted, a remark that had an odd aftertaste given Green's once keen interest in Italian post-Communist politics. Were these perhaps the same sort of robots currently replacing the Fiat assembly line workers of Turin and other Northern Italian cities?

That sort of grim irony once would have tortured Green and

probably inspired a song, but as a lapsed Marxist he'd shed the anxiety and guilt that fueled the early Scritti. "You grow up as a good, almost Catholic-leftist boy, and you learn to be scared of your sexuality, to be scared of your power," Green recalled. Now he talked about developing an improvised form of "post-political politics," based not on overarching ideology, but the pragmatic realization "that what you've got is needs, demands, and desires, and you go out and you fight for them."

"Desire" was a big buzzword in 1981. Drifting into popular culture from the world of critical theory, it retained an electric tinge of subversion. By the late seventies, French thinkers of the sort Green had been devouring were flirting with the once unthinkable (for the Left) notion that American capitalism, despite its faults, offered a lot of space for doing it yourself and bending the law. Could it be that "desire" actually had a better time of it in pluralistic, free-market societies than in bureaucratic Euro-socialist states? This notion of America as actually more free than the Old World was naturally blasphemous within the British socialist tradition (to which Rough Trade and the independent scene broadly belonged). But then British socialism always had a puritanical streak, a disdainful suspicion of vulgar materialism and stylistic excess. Running against the grain of both independent culture and the British Left, Scritti's celebration of consumer desire and commercial design was a heretical act.

In "Jacques Derrida," the B-side to the new Scritti's third single "Asylums in Jerusalem," Green personifies desire as an insatiable she-monster. "Rap-acious, rap-acious," he chants in a fey attempt at rapping, "Desire is so voracious/I want to eat your nation state." The exaltation of desire as an unstoppable force that refuses to recognize any boundaries fits the tenor of the hip crit of the day, as found in journals like *Semiotexte* and *Tel Quel*. But it also sounds a lot like the way globalization works: flows of capital, goods, and culture that make nonsense of national borders.

Green recognized that utopian yearnings—for perfection, purity, the absolute—were encoded in consumerism. These same longings also expressed themselves in that form of secular mysticism known as "love." In putting single quotes around the words "sweetest girl" in the song title "The 'Sweetest Girl,'" Green wanted to make it clear that he knew this dream was a mythic construct, an unrealistic hope, even as he was unable to stop wanting it or prevent himself from being seduced by songs exalting this heaven on Earth. Green wanted to be pop's deconstructionist, the Derrida of the Top 40, unraveling the lore of the love song even as he reveled in the beauty generated by its dream-lies. "The weakest link in every chain/I always want to find it," he crooned in "The 'Sweetest Girl,'" "The strongest words in each

belief/To find out what's behind it." The one mysticism he permitted himself was music itself, the endless mystery of melodic beauty. "Faithless now, just got soul," he simultaneously lamented and rejoiced on "Faithless," a gorgeous song about the impossibility of belief couched in the deep testifying certainty of gospel.

Up-tempo reggae with a cloying, caramel-sweet melody, "Asylums in Jerusalem" received Rough Trade's strongest push to date, but despite this, and some heavy support from radio, it ended up Scritti's third not-quite-hit in a row. Although *Songs to Remember*, the debut album, reached number twelve on the U.K. album charts, Scritti hadn't escaped the ghetto of being a cult group. Like Orange Juice a year earlier, Green underwent the public humiliation of having talked loudly about "pop" without having become popular. The problem lay partly with the music, which sounded underproduced, but mainly with the lyrics. This was heady stuff for pop music. Green's frequent lyrical nods to his favorite philosophers like Wittgenstein and Nietzsche, while cute, certainly decreased the likelihood of the songs' words ever being reprinted in *Smash Hits*, the glossy new teenybop magazine, whose soaring circulation was eclipsing the dour old "inky" music papers like *NME*.

"What has meaning is what sells, and what sells is what has meaning," Green had declared after his return from the Welsh wilderness. But not enough people were buying the new Scritti and for someone with a healthy ego like Green, this was crushing. In interviews he lashed out at Rough Trade, accusing them of frittering away their money on "silly groups with silly music," meaning Pere Ubu and Red Crayola, instead of focusing their resources on getting Scritti into the charts. Eventually, Green made a final break with the independent ideal and started talking to major labels. He also streamlined Scritti into a solo vehicle in all but name. In interviews, Green nonchalantly renounced the pseudocollectivism of the days when Scritti were a twenty-strong music/theory think tank. "I remember we were absolutely shocked when it was suddenly announced that Green was going to be the leader of Scritti Politti," says Gina Birch of the Raincoats, "that it was no longer a democracy." Bassist Nial Jinks was the first to chafe against the new regime and quit. Organizer Matthew Kay soon followed suit. Although increasingly superseded by the use of drum machines, Tom Morley hung on until November 1982, a few months after *Songs to Remember*.

Having paid off his old comrades-in-arms for the rights to the Scritti Politti brand, Green and his new manager, Bob Last, secured a lucrative deal with Virgin Records and set up a publishing company for Green's songs called Jouissance. Scritti was no longer a band but "a kind of production company," said Green, with the singer as the

pivotal constant surrounded by a floating pool of collaborators and producers. After too many false starts, Green was determined to make good on his manifest destiny: stardom.

THIS “PRODUCTION COMPANY” model was the in-vogue notion of 1982. After Josef K, Paul Haig set up one called Rhythm of Life. He didn’t want to be in a traditional band or play live anymore, just to produce records aimed for the dance floor. In interviews, he dreamily imagined Rhythm of Life diversifying into “art and prints and video.” But the first New Pop folk to talk about replacing the rockist model of “the band” in favor of the dynamic and flexible “production company” were British Electric Foundation. Formed by ex-Human League members Martyn Ware and Ian Craig Marsh, B.E.F. went one step beyond the entryist strategy of signing to a major label, instead styling itself as a minicorporation that negotiated with record companies as an equal. In a further innovation, B.E.F. included one nonmusical partner, their manager Bob Last.

It was Last who had actually engineered the breakup of the Human League in the first place, perceiving that the deadlocked group would be better off as two separate outfits. Shortly after the split, Last invited a devastated Ware to visit for a weekend in Scotland and pitched him the idea of the production company. PiL was an obvious precursor, along with Robert Fripp’s talk of “small, mobile, independent, and intelligent units” replacing the unwieldy prog-era megabands. With their permanent members on a steady wage, bands were expensive. Even if they got successful enough to pay off their record company debts, the profit pie ended up being divided into many pieces. But a production company could hire (and fire) session musicians and vocalists on a flat-fee, no-royalty basis. Increasingly, with advances in music technology, they could work with endlessly compliant, unpaid machines.

“We liked the idea of setting up this complicated corporate structure before a note had been played,” says Last. “It seemed like an amusing gesture. So there was literally a partnership of shareholdings, and I didn’t play a note on anything but I had a share in it. My role was what corporations today would call strategy director.” Other contemporary inspirations for B.E.F. included the black disco production company the Chic Organization and George Clinton’s Parliament-Funkadelic strategy of signing endless recombinations of the same pool of musicians to separate deals with different record companies.

Although Ware and Marsh were still in debt to Virgin for their part

in the two unsuccessful Human League albums, Last negotiated a new contract with the company for B.E.F. "It was a really unusual deal," recalls Marsh. "We had to deliver one major act to Virgin every year, and each year we had to provide albums for every act signed in previous years." Heaven 17, B.E.F.'s first major "act," featured Ware, Marsh, and their old Meatwhistle friend Glenn Gregory, who was brought in to be the lead singer. Along with the major releases, B.E.F. were also free to deliver up to twelve minor album projects every year, which Virgin would be obliged to put out. "These were essentially art projects, instrumental works, like Eno's Ambient series," says Marsh.

The first B.E.F. art-i-fact was a cassette-only minialbum of instrumental music called *Music for Stowaways*, peppy synth music designed for Sony's portable cassette player (then called Stowaway, later renamed Walkman), which had recently come on the market. *Stowaways* bore the clear imprint of Last, as it was essentially an electronic remake of the Fire Engines' *Lubricate Your Living Room*. According to Marsh, the idea was also inspired by "moving around London on the tube, going to meetings, working all over the place, and listening to music on these Stowaways. It made you feel like you were in a film all the time. Everyone takes that for granted now, but you can't imagine how big an impact it had, almost on the level of something like virtual reality. So our concept for *Stowaways* was 'a soundtrack for your life.' We mixed it on headphones, not speakers, so that it would sound good on portable players. And it was a limited edition, ten thousand copies, cassette only."

Styling themselves as a corporation was just part of B.E.F.'s antirockist polemic. They talked of abandoning the idea of music as a world-changing force and accepting it as "just a medium for enjoyment," as Ware put it, something that enhanced your everyday life, like *Stowaways*. "That's one of the biggest myths ever, that pop music changes the world," Ware declared. "It's just a confection." Ironic, then, that the first release from Heaven 17 was the full-blown protest song "(We Don't Need This) Fascist Groove Thang," written in the gap between Ronald Reagan's election in November 1980 and his inauguration early in 1981. "Fascist Groove Thang" received a huge amount of press attention in the U.K. and its catchy-as-hell electronic ersatz of disco funk looked set to chart big, but the BBC grew nervous that the lines "Reagan's president elect/Fascist guard in motion" were actually libelous and an unofficial Radio One ban effectively halted the single's rise just short of the Top 40. Heaven 17's next single, the brilliant "I'm Your Money," was also something of a consciousness raiser, transposing the language of business onto love and marriage ("I'm offering you the post of wife") à la Gang of Four's "Contract."

The group may have seen music as “just entertainment,” but they seemed unable to refrain from slyly slipping some *Entertainment!*-like elements of subversion into their glossy-surfaced pop.

Heaven 17's pop was superlatively shiny, almost intimidating in its precision-tooled panache. To differentiate themselves from the Human League, Ware and Marsh developed a pop funk that merged state-of-the-art electronics with real bass and guitar. For “Fascist Groove Thang” they wanted a jazzy, syncopated bassline similar to the bass break in Chic's “I Want Your Love.” “We found this local Sheffield musician, John Wilson, a black guy who was only seventeen,” recalls Marsh. “We told him what we were after and he did it on the spot, almost first take.” Wilson's bass and rhythm guitar ended up all over the “funky” side one of *Penthouse and Pavement*, Heaven 17's debut album.

Penthouse's other secret weapon was the Linn Drum Computer, the same rhythm machine used by Martin Rushent to make the Human League competitive. “Literally within a fortnight of that technology coming into the country, it was all over our album,” says Ware, who did the rhythm programming. “I didn't know how to play conventional drums, so I did whatever I liked the sound of.” What resulted were amazingly funky beats that didn't resemble an acoustic drum kit at all. Also crucial to *Penthouse's* crisp, in-your-face sound was the “dry” (meaning reverb-free) production. Without the “wetness” of sound reflections, the listener doesn't get an aural picture of a band playing in a real acoustic space. But Marsh and Ware didn't believe in rock's pseudonaturalism. They preferred the pop artifice of constructing records in the studio. So they mixed *Penthouse* to sound good through the single mono speaker of a cheap transistor radio. The first, “funky” side of *Penthouse* “sounded fantastic on the radio,” says Ware. “It just punched out amongst everything else.”

Behind *Penthouse's* sonic attack lay genuine aggression. After being kicked out of the Human League by his old friend Phil Oakey, Martyn Ware was hopping mad. He was also hopped up on creative energy. *Stowaways* and the bulk of *Penthouse* were recorded in a single burst in the weeks immediately following the split. The second side of *Penthouse*—which was more electronic, an extension of the original Human League—was done in just one week. “I was incandescent with anger,” says Ware. “And sometimes it just pours out of you, the ideas.” Along with competitive sparring with Oakey's League to see which group would get on the charts first, *Penthouse* songs such as “Play to Win” were also driven by an urge to throw off the shackles of Northern working-class inverted snobbery, Sheffield's traditional “begrudgery,” as Ware puts it, toward those who move down south to London to become big shots.

“Aspiration is the thread running through the entire album,” says Ware. “At its deepest psychological level, *Penthouse* is about breaking free from home, breaking free from the constrictions of a society and going out into the big wide world. Coming from the background that Ian, Glenn, and I did, it wasn’t a given that we’d ever get the opportunity. We could all have ended up working in a steelworks or some grim office job.” The title track, “Penthouse and Pavement,” concerns the paradoxes of middle-class people trying to be “street credible” and working-class people wanting to rise to the top. “That song is about social inequality, but also about the excitement of actually trying to make it. Not necessarily becoming rich, which is how it was interpreted wrongly by many people. I still get these ex-City of London finance traders telling me, ‘Oh yeah that song really inspired me when I was in the city.’” For these sons of socialist Sheffield (Ware even believed in nationalizing the banks), the ambivalence of their aspirational imagery was obvious. But to others, the distinction between Thatcherite values and what Heaven 17 were celebrating was not clear at all.

These ambiguities came to the fore with *Penthouse*’s witty cover image: a painting, based on a corporate advertisement Marsh found in *Newsweek*, depicting Heaven 17 as pin-striped executives discussing business plans and negotiating deals. On the front, the B.E.F. logo appears above the slogan “The New Partnership—That’s opening doors all over the world,” while the words “Sheffield. Edinburgh. London” were placed directly under the Heaven 17 brand name.

Posing as a multinational was simultaneously send-up, wish fulfillment, and an act of rock criticism. “We were debunking the mythology of the musician as this wandering minstrel who gets ripped off by the record company and gets paid to take drugs all the time,” says Ware. “A reality check. Bob Dylan may *think* he’s a rebel, but he’s actually a multinational asset. Anybody who signs to a major label is part of a huge business machine. The idea was, Let’s get rid of all this hypocrisy of ‘we’re artists, we don’t care about the money.’ Let’s strip the facade bare and have a look at what’s underneath: handshakes, signing contracts, *busy-ness*.” B.E.F. aimed to demolish other rock myths, too. They had no interest in performing live and limited the promotion of *Penthouse* to appearances in discotheques where they lip-synched to tapes. Says Marsh, “That whole set of ideas to do with expressivity, contact with the audience, community, I was against that right off the bat.”

Penthouse and Pavement “sold over a hundred thousand copies, roughly ten times more than either *Reproduction* or *Travelogue*,” says Marsh. There were no hit singles, which pained Ware and Marsh as they watched the Human League’s runaway success. Still, earning

their 1 percent off *Dare's* sales of five million salvaged that wound a little. Besides, in the critical and hipster sense, *Penthouse* was a monstrous success. "That record was absolutely ubiquitous in a way that went far beyond its actual chart profile," recalls Last.

Still rolling off their initial burst of momentum, Ware and Marsh launched straight into the next B.E.F. project, *Music of Quality and Distinction Volume One*. Like *Penthouse*, it continued Ware's mission to show that it was possible to make "synthetic music with soul." This time around B.E.F. put themselves in the role of producers and arrangers. The *Quality and Distinction* concept was twofold. It consisted entirely of pop classics remade by B.E.F., and most of the songs were collaborations with different famous singers. One could see the whole project as an essay about pop, celebrating the Tin Pan Alley/Brill Building/Nashville tendency to maintain strict separation between songwriter, singer, and producer. Ware and Marsh rejected rock's raw expression and aligned themselves with pop classicism. "We were fans of the genius producer, people like Phil Spector," says Ware. "We loved the idea of assembling something of great beauty, almost like sonic architecture." But beneath *Quality and Distinction* lurked a deeper psychological subtext. By elevating the producer's role as auteur, Marsh and Ware slyly implied that Martin Rushent had everything to do with the success of Oakey's new League.

Quality and Distinction played some neat pop-crit games. Sandie Shaw covered "Anyone Who Had a Heart," a tune originally associated with her rival, Cilla Black. Billy Mackenzie attempted to out-sing his idol/prototype David Bowie on a remake of "The Secret Life of Arabia" from *Heroes*. But apart from Tina Turner's tour de force take on the Temptations' "Ball of Confusion," the new versions failed to surpass the originals. As a unified listening experience, *Quality and Distinction* felt flat and motley, and the original plan to release the entire album as a series of double-A-sided singles was cut short when the first few failed to get anywhere near the charts.

B.E.F. celebrated dry, radio-ready production, but another kind of aridity seemed to fatally permeate B.E.F.'s work, at least as far as their pop prospects were concerned. The lingering antimystique postpunk spirit kept them from being a group that everyday fans took to heart. "We don't think it's healthy for people to hold up fairly ordinary people as some kind of demi-god," Marsh told *NME*, rejecting the very forces of identification and projection that animate pop culture. At the end of 1982, B.E.F. found themselves faced with an embarrassing quandary. Having styled themselves as a corporation, a hit factory churning out perfect consumer product, what were they to do when hardly anyone was consuming their products?

Despite its defects as a listening experience, *Quality and Distinction*

could claim to be a seminal exercise in postmodern pop. At the end of the seventies, postmodernist concepts started filtering down from academia to the music press. In rock, the opposition between modernism and postmodernism corresponded neatly to the after-punk vanguard of PiL, the Pop Group et al. striving strenuously for total innovation versus the retro-eclectic approach shared by 2-Tone, Postcard, and Adam Ant. As a sensibility, postmodernism also eroded the certainties and knee-jerk reflexes of a certain kind of rockthink rooted in binary oppositions like depth versus surface and authentic versus inauthentic.

Postpunk's struggle to avoid escapism and superficiality had led to either hair shirt propaganda (the Pop Group) or the existential abyss (Joy Division). Giddy with relief at jettisoning these twin burdens of guilt and despair, journalists such as Morley celebrated "the transient thrill" of disposable pop. They trashed well-meaning and meaningfulness in favor of hedonistic paeans to consumption and polished product. And they challenged the implicitly masculine critical hierarchies that despised the synthetic and mass produced.

This gender-coded shift from "rock" to "pop" sensibility was in many ways a flashback to glam. In the early seventies, David Bowie and Roxy Music had managed to bridge the ever widening gap between singles-focused dance pop and album-oriented art rock. They made "serious" music that was also playful and image conscious. Roxy Music, especially, wove together futuristic elements and period evocations, while Bowie (with *Pin-Ups*) and Bryan Ferry's solo albums explored the creative possibilities of the cover version to the hilt. Glam, in fact, had been postmodernist long before the term had currency outside art theory circles.

New Pop involved a renaissance of glam's interest in artifice, androgyny, and all the delicious games you could play with pop idolatry. Perhaps the climax of all these tendencies was the bizarre critical apotheosis of Dollar, a schlocky male/female duo that had already garnered a smidgen of campy love from hipsters for their sheer plasticness even before they teamed up with producer Trevor Horn.

Horn started 1981 as a has-been, despite having scored a number one hit in sixteen countries with the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star" two years earlier. After two unsuccessful Buggles albums, he and partner Geoff Downes joined Yes for one album and a tour. Dollar were Horn's ticket back from the brink of irrelevance. An accomplished musician who'd been in a youth orchestra and could sight-read from a score, the producer hated punk rock. For him, the true sonic revolutionaries of the late seventies were Kraftwerk, Donna Summer, and Abba. Accordingly, Horn's concept for Dollar was to

Moroderize the group's M.O.R. Taking the duo's fabricated fakeness to an almost conceptual extremity as if they were a work of pop art, "Hand Held in Black and White" and "Mirror Mirror"—the first two singles he cowrote and produced for them—dazzled the ears with their futuristic hypergloss. Dollar became hugely hip. And so did Horn.

ABC loved the Dollar singles and they were looking for a producer to help realize their sonic dream of fusing symphonic disco, nouveau Roxy, and piercingly intelligent lyrics. By the end of 1981, a year after Morley's New Pop feature introduced them to the world, the Sheffield group had managed to get a major-label record deal, but their music fell short of their aspirations. Their October 1981 debut single, "Tears Are Not Enough," sounded scrawny, a mere demo for the spectacular sound they wanted. On *Top of the Pops*, singer Martin Fry wore a gold lamé suit, but it didn't sit right on his hulking frame. His dancing was awkward, his presence lacked authority. From sound to visuals, ABC were not yet walking it like they talked it. So they turned to Horn.

"Steve Singleton from ABC said to me, 'If you produce us you'll be the most fashionable producer in the world,'" laughs Horn. "I was really taken with that, the arrogance of it." ABC told him they wanted to make "superhuman" records. Horn agreed to produce the band's second single, "Poison Arrow." It took him a while to grasp what the band wanted to achieve, a collision between the orchestral disco splendor of a Gloria Gaynor and the word-twisting lyrical depths of an Elvis Costello. "It dawned on me as I was working on the record—and this is what I'd tell people at the time—'It's like Dylan, except it's disco music instead of an acoustic guitar.' The guy's writing about what he really feels, but it's gonna be played in a dance club so it's gotta have the functional quality of disco."

A lavish tempest of melodramatic grand-piano chords, thunderous drums, and synth parts simulating string sweeps and horn fanfares, "Poison Arrow" sounded like a million bucks had been spent on it, and yes, it sounded superhuman. At its core, though, lay the DIY principle—not so much "anyone can do it" but "anyone can be a star." And ABC *did* it. "Poison Arrow" went Top 10 in Britain. The next single, the even more magnificently appointed "The Look of Love," which had real strings, angelic backing vocals, tympani, and trumpets, did even better, making the U.K. Top 5 in June 1982 and the *Billboard* Top 20 not long after. Both "Look of Love" and "Poison Arrow" (which was actually released after "Look" in America, where it was also a Top 30 hit) garnered lots of play on the fledgling MTV channel, thanks to ABC's witty, glitzy videos.

To help him create the majestic sound ABC desired—James Brown meets Nelson Riddle's Sinatra—Horn assembled a crack squad that

included Anne Dudley, a classically trained keyboard player and arranger, and engineer Gary Langan, both of whom had worked on his Dollar records. ABC were actually capable musicians, and the tunes they'd written remained at the core of it all, but Horn and Dudley were given carte blanche by the group to embellish and expand upon these kernels. "ABC weren't the least bit precious about their songs," recalls Dudley. "They were eager to embrace everything, totally open to making it as exciting and epic as possible. Another big reason why the album sounds so lush and bright is Gary Langan's engineering and mixing."

The album was named *The Lexicon of Love*, and with good reason. Fry reveled in wordplay like a Cole Porter chronically addicted to puns and alliteration, mixed metaphors and perilously extended tropes. But what, underneath Fry's fizzy wordplay, were ABC actually *about*? "Tears Are Not Enough" sounded almost like a New Pop manifesto (no time for wallowing or whining, strive and take pride) disguised as a song about heartbreak. Other ABC songs were more like metapop, playing games with pop's cliché-encrusted lore of love. "The Look of Love" echoed Bacharach and David, "Many Happy Returns" quoted the Zombies' "She's Not There," and "Valentine's Day" harked back even further to 1930s Hollywood with its climactic lines, "If you gave me a pound for all the moments I missed and I got dancing lessons for all the lips I shoulda kissed/I'd be a millionaire/I'd be a Fred Astaire."

The echoes of prerock showbiz carried through to the whole look of ABC's records. Each single featured a sleeve note penned by Fry, an homage to the period (roughly pre-1967) when all long-playing records had them. To complete the atmosphere of bygone elegance, ABC added cute period touches, such as the little box informing the purchaser how to get the best out of the record ("Don't use a faulty or worn stylus.... Keep it clean by wiping it with an antistatic cloth") and the slogan "Purveyors of Fine Product," located next to the logo for Neutron Records, ABC's imprint through Phonogram.

Like B.E.F., ABC aimed to make music of quality and distinction. *Lexicon* was cunningly crafted to sound like no expense had been spared. It was widely assumed to be fully orchestrated, but in fact, strings were only used on four tracks. ABC also brought in appropriately deluxe sartorial signifiers such as tuxedos, bow ties, and gold lamé suits. "We wanted to look like we came from Vegas, so we went to Carnaby Street and hired this very camp tailor who used to make clothes for Marc Bolan," recalls Fry. "It's 1982, so he probably hadn't been asked to make a gold lamé suit for nearly a decade." For the cover photographs, ABC wanted the rich tones of "a Powell and Pressburger movie, where the color red is *very* red. Steve and Mark

had decided that I should be like a character. ‘The album’s a movie and you’re the star.’”

The front cover of the album depicted Martin Fry as the dashing hero of a crime melodrama, brandishing a revolver, a fainting damsel clasped in his other arm. Flip to the back of the record, and the *mise-en-scène* is revealed as staged. We see the backroom people behind the theatrical spectacle, as played by the other members of ABC: the prompter reading from a script, a fatigued stagehand with a cigarette tucked behind the ear, a flunky with a bouquet ready for the leading lady. It was all decidedly Brechtian.

Indeed, for all the reinvocation of romance and Hollywood glamour, ABC deep down retained that signature postpunk wariness about love, love songs, and the unrealistic dreams propagated by pop. In a weird way, they, too, resembled Gang of Four. Tellingly, ABC’s manager Rob Warr was not only Bob Last’s partner, but had previously managed Gang of Four during the *Entertainment!* era. “Date Stamp,” at once the wittiest and most poignant song on *Lexicon*, recalled the imagery of “Damaged Goods,” as brokenhearted Fry is “looking for a girl that meets supply with demand.” In a world where “love has no guarantee,” he’s a discarded commodity whose sell-by date has expired. “All of My Heart,” ABC’s third Top 10 single in a row, sounded sickly sweet but its sentiments rivaled “Love Like Anthrax” in their bracing *unsentimentality*. “It surprises me when people pin a Valentino tag on the group when a lot of the songs were out to demolish the power of love,” Fry told *The Face*. “‘All of My Heart,’ for me, was saying, ‘Skip the hearts and flowers and wash your hands of the whole sentimental glop,’ you know?”

Yet for all the clever cynicism, at the core of the record was the real pain of Martin Fry, disillusioned lover. His genuine bitterness was the reason *Lexicon* worked. “We wanted the songs to be romantic in the traditional sense, but there’s also a sinister edge,” says Fry. “‘Poison Arrow’ is about falling in love but also how it kicks you in the teeth.” And Fry *had* been kicked in the teeth. “*Lexicon* is all about Martin getting dumped by this specific girl,” says Horn. “All of the songs are about that anger and outrage he felt. And on ‘The Look of Love,’ when Martin sings, ‘When the girl has left you out on the table’ and then there’s a girl going, ‘Goodbye!,’ well, that’s *the* girl. It was my suggestion—‘Why don’t we get the *actual* girl that you’ve wrote these songs for in to do the vocal?’ It was very funny!”

The triumph of *Lexicon* lay in the slight gap between Fry’s aspirations and his ability. Like Dexys’ Kevin Rowland, he wasn’t quite a natural singer. His range was limited, his falsetto slightly strained. Nor did Fry have the innate panache to fully play the debonair role he’d cast himself in. His moves weren’t slick, and his acne scars were

visible through the makeup. Fry *willed* himself to be a star. "I am a punk, I always have been and I always will be," he once said. "What Fry took from punk was the zeal," says Paul Morley, ABC's champion at *NME*. "ABC couldn't have happened without punk because that gave people the possibility of creating their own master plans and manifestos."

ABC were also a brilliant example of music as "active criticism." Fry had in fact started out as a fanzine writer. When he went to interview Vice Versa for his zine *Modern Drugs*, the group was so impressed that they offered him a position in the band. A few years later, ABC's rhetoric would massively influence the music press's shift to New Pop ideas. In a sense, ABC helped create the critical climate that would embrace them. They repaid the compliments, taking the title *The Lexicon of Love* from the headline of Ian Penman's *NME* review of an ABC show, and giving Morley a cameo role in the Edwardian fantasia video for "The Look of Love."

At the end of 1982, ABC could look back on a year of grand achievements. The record of the summer, *Lexicon* was number one for a month and went platinum in the U.K. There'd been a huge showbiz-style tour. They were working on the first ABC movie, *Mantrap*, directed by Julien Temple of *Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* fame. They'd even had a Top 20 hit in America. ABC had talked big, but, unlike New Pop fellow travelers B.E.F. and Scritti, they'd surpassed their own hype. In the process, ABC set the bar impossibly high for their peers.

**NEW POP'S PEAK, THE SECOND BRITISH INVASION OF AMERICA,
AND THE RISE OF MTV**

THE TRUE SIGN that you're living through a golden age is the feeling that it's never going to end. There's no earthly reason why it should stop. It's an illusion, of course, like the first swoony rush of falling in love, but that's how it felt to be young, British, and besotted with pop music in 1982.

No longer wishful thinking on the part of overexcited journalists, New Pop was reality, rampaging over the surfaces of everyday life in a way that would have seemed unthinkable a year earlier. The turning point came with the Human League's Christmas 1981 number one hit, "Don't You Want Me," which later would top the American charts, too. Alongside Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" and ABC's "The Look of Love," both big *Billboard* hits, "Don't You Want Me" heralded a British invasion of America. In the United States, the New Pop groups took almost a year to establish a stranglehold on the mainstream, but in the U.K.—so much smaller and more concentrated in terms of radio, TV, and media—the regime change was instantaneous. In the early months of '82, it felt as if an invisible switch had been pulled and the floodgates opened to irrigate the charts with a rejuvenating gush of color, exuberance, and optimism, a flood that washed away all the stodgy '70s leftovers and installed in their places a host of fresh-faced pretenders: Altered Images, Haircut 100, the Associates, Depeche Mode, ABC, Bow Wow Wow, Japan, Fun Boy Three, New Order, and more.

Of them all, the one group that epitomized the New Pop dream of a chart-busting music that combined pop's flash with postpunk's perplexity was the Associates. Fittingly, their all too brief reign as U.K. chart stars (lasting just nine months, February '82 to September '82) coincided with New Pop's absolute zenith. At the start of 1982, they surely seemed like unlikely contenders. The gambit of releasing six singles in swift succession during 1981 earned them some nice critical notices, but not one of their indie releases dented the charts. Still, Billy Mackenzie and Alan Rankine had several aces up their sleeves, most notably an old song called "Party Fears Two," which became their first single after signing a new deal with a major label, WEA.

When the Associates appeared on *Top of the Pops* to lip-synch "Party Fears Two" in February 1982 they were totally unknown to most viewers. The song was enchanting, from the sunshafts-peeking-through-clouds intro to the blithe, bittersweet piano refrain to the cold smolder of Mackenzie's voice, and the mysterious lyrics, seemingly fractured snapshots of a breakup in progress, were intriguing. But

what really transfixed the ambushed *TOTP* viewers was the way Billy moved (at one point he sashayed *backward!*), the impossible panache of the man. “Party Fears” shot into the Top 10 the following week. A few months later the Associates scored another big hit with “Club Country,” all Chic-gone-Nordic rhythm guitar and nervous, scurrying disco bass. The song was a blistering rebuke to the poseurs of New Romanticism, its lyrics honing right in on the hollow heart of the in crowd: “If we stick around/We’re sure to be looked down upon.” In the *TOTP* appearance for “Club Country,” Rankine strummed a chocolate guitar (specially made by Harrods for six hundred pounds), which he fed to the studio audience during the song’s second verse.

A similar spirit of lunatic extravagance suffused *Sulk*, the Associates’ second “proper” album, which was released in May 1982. Saturated with textures, overdubbed to the hilt, *Sulk* sounds sumptuous. “When I was younger I went into my mother’s sewing box, and beneath the balls of ordinary red or black or white thread, there’d be this thick, luxuriant embroidery thread,” recalls Rankine. “Purples, turquoises, lapis lazuli colors. That’s what I wanted sound-wise for *Sulk*, that vibrancy, that luxuriance of color.” Throughout the recording process, Mackenzie also implored producer Mike Hedges to “make it sound expensive.” This opulence carried through to the third Associates hit of 1982, “18 Carat Love Affair,” from its title to the picture on the single’s sleeve, in which Mackenzie, naked, lies facedown on a marble floor, while pearls and precious stones are poured over his body by a beautiful girl clad in a Burberry raincoat.

Sulk was the Associates’ injecting all the voluptuous disorientation of psychedelic experience into pop. The album’s two standouts are “No”—a tormented ballad with a stately Russian melody and helium-high backing vocals oozing like a ghostly mist—and the anxiously euphoric “Skipping,” which contains Mackenzie’s most out-there vocal performance ever, as well as some of the duo’s daftest lyrics (“Ripping ropes from the Belgian wharf’s/Breathless beauxillous griffin once removed seemed dwarfed”). Like the Beatles circa “I Am the Walrus” or Brian Wilson during the *Smile* sessions, the group used all kinds of found sounds and scrap metal percussion. The snap-crackle-pop of John Murphy’s firework drums—played on a drum kit composed entirely of snares—threads the album. Mackenzie actually described the *Sulk* sound as “Abba on acid.” Says Rankine, “Bill was always out on a limb, telling the producer, Mike Hedges, to ‘make it sound like it’s inside a sarcophagus’ or, ‘make it sound like grass’”

Sulk was hugely successful, but when “18 Carat Love Affair” came to a halt just outside the Top 20, it seemed that normality was reasserting itself. Something so freakish and excessive as the Associates was never meant to be allowed across pop’s threshold. At

this point, a perverse, self-destructive instinct seemed to take hold of Mackenzie. On the eve of a major U.K. tour, he bailed out due to a combination of stage fright and the terror of being sucked into the rockbiz machine. Rankine, eager to break America, where huge sums were being offered by labels such as Sire, was furious, and quit the band in October. Snatching defeat from the jaws of triumph, the Associates became one of the great, tantalizing should-have-beens of British pop.

Two other Scottish groups, Altered Images and Simple Minds, played a large role in New Pop's wonder year. Altered Images' "Happy Birthday," produced by Human League hit maker Martin Rushent, sold like bottled sunshine in the winter of 1981. From its sparkly guitars, shimmering xylophone pulse, and tumbly drums, to Clare Grogan's giddy glee, Altered Images' music was as fizzy and irresistible as soda pop. Already known for her role as a Scottish schoolgirl in the cult movie *Gregory's Girl*, Grogan captivated the New Pop nation with her charming blend of coquette and naïf, while rockist grumps found her bouncing and frisking the incarnation of everything frivolous and flimsy about New Pop.

Like most of the New Pop bands, Altered Images had actually started out with proper postpunk credentials. They were protégés of Siouxsie and the Banshees, whose Steve Severin produced most of their debut album, including the single "Dead Pop Stars," a sinister tune about cruelly fickle teenyboppers tearing down the posters of last year's idols. Even after Rushent coated their music in a sleek sheen, the actual inner mechanisms of the music remained similar to Wire and Joy Division. The scratchy guitar figures and twinkling basslines on glorious hits such as "I Could Be Happy" and "See Those Eyes" have a sound remarkably close to Bernard Sumner's and Peter Hook's, making the songs candy-coated cousins to New Order's own hits "Ceremony" and "Temptation."

Simple Minds were more unlikely participants in the New Pop explosion. In their early days, they came across as a confused mixture of art rocky New Wave and Eurodisco (brilliantly confused in the case of 1980's panoramic/cinematic masterpiece *Empires and Dance*). More often than not, their attempts to fuse rock and dance sounded lumbering, all crashing drums and strident vocals. Simple Minds looked destined for arenas rather than discotheques. Then something changed. "Promised You a Miracle" was the first song Simple Minds intentionally created as a single, as opposed to an album track that then got selected as a single. As a result, their whole aesthetic mind-set changed from prog to pop. Guitars took a backseat to glinting synths. The music seemed to open up and breathe. "Promised" was a huge hit in the spring of 1982. During the song's long, slow fade—

nearly two minutes long, it's like the glorious sunset to a perfect day—Jim Kerr's repeated rejoicing cries that "everything is possible" capture the all-gates-open, anything-can-happen feeling of the New Pop moment, as did the accompanying album's title: *New Gold Dream* (81-82-83-84).

Watching their Scottish contemporaries, Altered Images and Simple Minds, romp onto the pop charts, Orange Juice seethed on the sidelines. Having made the major-label plunge in the hope of having hits, the group recorded a debut album, *You Can't Hide Your Love Forever*, that polished their classic Postcard sound but was still nowhere near commercially competitive. Meanwhile, an English group called Haircut 100 had gotten big with a sound and look suspiciously close to Orange Juice's. Haircut 100 had the same choppy pop-funk sound and the clean-cut, cuddly image. Fresh-faced front man Nick Heyward even sang a bit like Edwyn Collins. With his chipmunk smile peeking out between rosy cheeks, Heyward exuded innocuousness with just a twinkle of sauciness in the eyes. Song titles such as "Lemon Firebrigade," "Love's Got Me in Triangles," and "Love Plus One" (a big hit in the United States) had something of OJ's arch faux naïveté, but Haircut 100's high-caliber musicianship—all snazzy-jazzy horns and rippling percussion—was a helluva lot slicker, closer to Steely Dan than Velvet Underground.

Edwyn Collins decided it was time to get serious. He instigated a purge of the group's members that he considered insufficiently professional, namely James Kirk and Steven Daly, and formed a new, "tight" Orange Juice with Zimbabwean Zeke Manyika on drums and guitarist Malcolm Ross (formerly of Josef K). The new hardheaded approach produced a big hit in the spring of 1983 with "Rip It Up." The song's squelchy janglefunk represented Collins's new ideal, "a sophisticated amateurism" that wasn't "sloppy, but won't place slickness as the ultimate virtue." The sophisticated part of the equation came through with the record's state-of-the-art eighties dance groove, which pivoted around a slippery bassline created using the Roland 303, a brand new machine that later became famous as the signature sound of acid house. The "amateurism" survived in Collins's charmingly fallible vocals and the song's witty homage to the original DIY catalyst, Buzzcocks' *Spiral Scratch*. Collins followed the couplet "You know the scene it's very humdrum/And my favorite song's entitled 'Boredom'" with a two-note guitar riff that copied Pete Shelley's solo on "Boredom."

To some observers, New Pop's absence of blatant punk-style gestures of threat or protest and its "retreat" from postpunk's overt experimentalism and agitprop made it merely escapist. Yet almost all the groups mentioned above, even Haircut 100, had some connection

to punk. Most believed they were honoring or furthering some element of punk's original mission, albeit in a much transformed context. The nod to *Spiral Scratch* in "Rip It Up" is a blatant example of this. Orange Juice meant the song as a metapop statement: The chorus, "Rip it up and start again," in part expressed Collins's growing disillusionment with New Pop.

By early 1983 there was already a dawning suspicion that things had gone awry. The bright sparks, such as the Associates, who'd pioneered the whole new mood in pop were being gradually displaced by opportunists who weren't as ideas or ideals driven. Clones and careerists had latched on to the surface elements of New Pop—the playfully inventive videos, the deluxe production, the gender-bending and dressing up—and were taking over. This was especially the case internationally. In the United States, 1983 was really the year that New Pop broke: ABC, the Human League, Soft Cell, and Haircut 100 had all scored hits there early on, but it was the second wave of New Pop bands—Duran Duran, Eurythmics, Culture Club, Thompson Twins, and Wham!—who hit the jackpot, and they owed their success in large part to a recent invention called MTV.

Music video was nothing new. The first examples dated back to the midsixties. They were typically made by bands such as the Beatles and the Stones who'd gotten so big that making promo films was the only way they could fulfill the demand from television shows across the world, as it was physically impossible for them to perform on so many TV stations. Apart from a few "artistic" forays, most of these early pop clips were rudimentary affairs depicting the bands lip-synching.

The roots of video as we understand it today lie more in the musical sequences of films like *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!* in which the Beatles caper around and do goofy dances instead of singing. The Monkees' TV series turned these antic interludes into a winning formula. So there's a poetic aptness to the fact that it was Michael Nesmith, the most serious minded Monkee, who originally came up with the concept for MTV. Nesmith became enamored with the creative possibilities of the promo video in the seventies while pursuing his career as a solo singer-songwriter, and made a series of imaginative clips for his own singles, such as "Rio." Although the videos were widely played around the world, Nesmith quickly discovered that there were hardly any outlets for them on American television. It was then that Nesmith came up with the concept for a program called *Popclips*. Eventually, the show was aired on Nickelodeon, a channel run by a cable TV division of Warner Brothers, to whom Nesmith also successfully pitched the idea of a video channel broadcasting pop promos around the clock. As the project developed into what eventually became MTV, it began to diverge from Nesmith's

more artistic conception of video. He ultimately dropped out and went off to make his own "video album," *Elephant Parts*.

In addition to convincing cable operators to take the station, the fledgling MTV had to sell itself to the record industry in order to get them to supply the promos free of charge. The main things that MTV had to offer were that it would be the nearest thing to a nationwide radio station that then existed in the United States and that it would serve as a tool for record companies to breakout new music, a function that radio had ceased to fulfill as it had grown more conservative in the late seventies. Unlike Britain, with its national, state-run pop station Radio One, American radio was a Balkanized welter of city-based and regional stations, further fragmented by formats that were precisely geared to please audience demographics defined by age, taste, and race. The radio stations were incredibly competitive, yet sounded extremely similar to the naked ear. This stemmed in part from the way that stations increasingly contracted their programming out to radio consultant firms, who turned playlist selection and format adjustment into a behaviorist science.

Then and now, American radio resembles a gigantic machine for ensuring that people almost never encounter any music they're not already predisposed to like. The motor-fear of radio programmers is the fickleness of listeners, whom it's believed will instantly flip to another channel if they hear something that offends them. Hence the emergence of the classic-rock format toward the end of the seventies, the play-it-safe selection of audience favorites spiced with a few recent hits. Overly cautious radio programming created a terrible sluggishness in the American record industry. It was one factor behind the dramatic slump in record sales that began in 1979. After all, if the radio's mostly playing things its listeners already like and probably already own, it's not likely to get them rushing out to the record store.

Punk and New Wave had fared badly in the United States in large part because of conservative radio programming, too. From the start, MTV focused on what the industry then called New Music. Roughly equivalent to New Pop but slightly more expansive, the category also included New Wave artists such as Elvis Costello, the Psychedelic Furs, and the Pretenders. Equally crucial was MTV's nationwide reach. Unlike in Britain, where singles often entered the charts high (or even at number one), hits almost always built up their momentum slowly in the United States, thanks to the uneven way that radio stations across the country added records to their playlists. The national impact of a record getting into heavy rotation on MTV had a dramatic effect on what Simon Frith calls "the *velocity* of sales."

In the first year and a half after its August 1981 launch, MTV's national reach was limited. Many regional cable operators didn't carry

the channel, and only 25 percent of American homes were wired for cable to begin with. But wherever it was available, MTV's impact was extraordinary. Unlikely Middle American towns suddenly experienced dramatic spikes in sales of New Music. Still, it was embarrassing for MTV that it was unavailable in either of America's two music industry capitals, New York and Los Angeles. The channel's solution was to appeal directly to the youth with the "I Want My MTV" campaign. Broadcast on network stations in the summer of 1982, the ads featured stars such as Pete Townshend, Mick Jagger, Adam Ant, Stevie Nicks, and Pat Benatar instructing frustrated would-be MTV viewers to "call your cable operator now" and demand that they start broadcasting the channel. The campaign worked. MTV debuted in Manhattan in September 1982 and in Los Angeles a few months later.

Early MTV was a curious animal, almost inadvertently radical. Because videos from domestic major-label acts were scarce, the channel depended on promos from the U.K. and Europe, where the pop video was already well established. Artists such as Queen, David Bowie, Abba, and the Boomtown Rats had specialized in striking promo clips. London already had the beginnings of a video industry in the late seventies, including such future auteurs of the form as Russell Mulcahy, creator of the promo for the Buggles' "Video Killed the Radio Star," the very first clip MTV played. This pretty much set the tone for MTV's early programming. They only had a few hundred videos at their disposal, 75 percent of them from England. More often than not, the videos for U.K. New Pop acts were far more imaginative and entertaining than those made for established American rock acts such as REO Speedwagon. Like the original British Invasion bands, the New Pop groups were attuned to style. Many had been to art college, and even those who hadn't usually possessed a glam-assimilated visual literacy that simply wasn't the norm in America. Even if the bands didn't direct or storyboard their own promos, they were already innately more videogenic than the Americans. Poseurs to the manner(ed) born, they just projected to the camera better.

A few arty Americans also benefited from this early phase of MTV. Devo already had half a dozen videos in the can when the channel launched. Gerald V. Casale remembers MTV's programming director Bob Pittman and promotions director John Sykes courting Devo over dinner. "They pitched us the whole MTV concept and told us why we should give them our videos for free. And of course, still being idealistic artists, we really thought, 'This is it, they understand what we've been trying to do.' We were so elated and thought, now we're going to be able to do what we want, make feature films." Like the Residents with their aborted *Vileness Fats* movie, Devo had dreamed of making "an anticapitalist science-fiction movie" and wanted to be the

first rock band to exploit the mixed-media potential of the laser disc format by making full-blown video albums.

These fantasies never quite came to fruition, but all of Devo's singles came with impressive promos directed by Casale either on his own or in collaboration with the band's filmmaker buddy Chuck Statler. The imagery for "Girl U Want" matched the music's Knack-style jack-off beat with its parody of American pop TV shows. An audience of screaming teenage girls flail and jive in grotesque regimented patterns, the unlikely object of their adoration being the pasty, geeky Devo. "Freedom of Choice" featured the heavily masked Devo as nerdy aliens delivering the group's most straightforward and unsparing critique of America's consumer society and political system yet: "Freedom of choice is what you've got/Freedom from choice is what you want." "Through Being Cool," the lead single from Devo's fourth album, *New Traditionalists*, was more oblique about its anti-Reaganism. It depicted the Smart Patrol, socially conscious teen misfits scooting around their hometown with laser guns, zapping brain-dead joggers and other symbols of eighties inanity.

All of Devo's early videos garnered heavy MTV airplay, alongside a handful of similarly video-savvy American New Wave groups such as Blondie, the Cars, the Stray Cats, the Go-Go's, and Talking Heads. The latter's "Once in a Lifetime" was an MTV favorite (despite never being released as a single in the United States) thanks to its brilliantly strange video choreographed by Toni Basil, in which David Byrne plays a kind of postmodernist televangelist preacher. Byrne remembers the early days of MTV fondly. "You could do a vaguely experimental film thing as cheaply as you possibly could, and if it was connected to a song, MTV would play it because they needed stuff desperately in those days. So you didn't have to tour in order to build up an audience. It was a bit like how I imagine the early days of pop singles were. You'd record something real quick, and then a month later it'd be a forty-five single in jukeboxes and it would be on the radio."

It took most American groups longer to grasp the artistic and promotional potential of the video, and this interval was the gap through which the British infiltrated the mainstream. The first hit that owed almost everything to its video and MTV's support was A Flock of Seagulls' "I Ran (So Far Away)," which reached the *Billboard* Top 10 in the fall of 1982. This Liverpool group came to symbolize the entire British Invasion era in the minds of its enemies on account of singer Mike Score's impressively ludicrous hair. If you managed to listen past the flying-saucer-like pompadour, A Flock of Seagulls essentially played a sort of postpunk lite. The heavily effected guitar was as prominent as the synths and really quite pleasing, not a million miles

from Alan Rankine's style. John Peel had enthusiastically supported the band early in their career. But Score's coiffure (being a hairdresser was his day job) made them the ultimate image-over-content band as far as American trad-rockers were concerned.

The English group that truly became synonymous with the power of MTV was Duran Duran. At the height of their success, Duran made veterans of 1977 complain that "it's like punk never happened." Indeed, the grievance was so widespread *Smash Hits* writer Dave Rimmer eventually used it as the title of a book about New Pop. But Duran Duran, as it happened, had come up through the same Birmingham-area scene as Swell Maps, and their initial concept was about as postpunk as imaginable: the Sex Pistols meets Chic. Soon, Duran Duran became the key figures in Birmingham's New Romantic scene. Like their London contemporaries Visage and Spandau Ballet, they quickly made their mark by harnessing the power of video, first with "Girls on Film" (seminaked fashion models cavorting in a wrestling ring) and then with a series of glitzy promos for the singles off their second album, *Rio*. Persuading their record company to cough up funds for a working holiday in Sri Lanka, Duran flew out with director Russell Mulcahy in August 1982 and shot three videos' worth of tropical backdrops and scantily clad models. Blending vapid exoticism with soft-core, calendar-girl eroticism, the promos went into heavy rotation on MTV. The one for "Rio," especially, defined their new, brazenly aspirational image, with the band posing on a yacht surrounded by models that could have come straight from the covers of those classic first five Roxy Music albums. By this point Duran had traded their flouncy New Romantic look for a more Bryan Ferry-like jet-set image. By 1983, Duran Duran were global megastars. The band still entertained some higher ambitions, which leaked out in the ripe gibberish of Simon LeBon's lyrics, the increasingly overblown videos, and the artistic affectations of keyboardist Nick Rhodes, who idolized Japan's David Sylvian and followed his dandy-aesthete lead by dabbling in Polaroid art. But musically they shed any lingering synthpop futurist trappings in favor of straightforward catchiness, as on the Beatles-y single "Is There Something I Should Know."

Even more than Duran Duran, the Thompson Twins were a classic example of a postpunk group who went through a drastic remodeling process to emerge as shiny New Popsters. In 1981 they were Johnny-come-lately types located somewhere between Scritti Politti and Pigbag, a seven-strong collective into percussion and personal politics. At one 1981 gig, singer Tom Bailey informed the audience that the group had been forced to cover up some sexist murals at the venue because the Thompson Twins "could never perform where such materials were on show." Something of that earnest vibe endured even

after the group shrank to a pop-oriented trio and Bailey started talking about intentionally making disposable pop. The gender and racial balance was impeccable: one white male (Bailey), one black male (Joe Leeway), one white female (Alannah Currie, who'd originally been inspired to buy a sax after seeing the Pop Group). In their cartoonish videos, the threesome's oddly asexual charisma was redolent of the dungaree-clad hosts of some progressive seventies children's TV program. Their ruthlessly tuneful MTV hits, such as "Hold Me Now" and "Love on Your Side," lingered in the brain like tapeworms. By 1984's *Into the Gap*, the Thompson Twins' global sales made them the Burger King of pop. "A multinational corporation is exactly what we are, bigger than a lot of the companies that are quoted on the stock exchange," said Bailey. What B.E.F. had parodied with a knowing socialist wink, the Thompson Twins had actually become.

Eurythmics were the one British Invasion group that American rock critics grudgingly acknowledged as "quality." Maybe they somehow sensed that the duo of Dave Stewart and Annie Lennox had paid their dues and built their skills the old-fashioned way. Indeed, they were industry veterans who'd been doggedly slogging their way to fame since before punk. An accomplished guitarist and former acid casualty, Stewart had joined a band in 1969 called Longdancer, who later signed to Elton John's Rocket label. Before forming Eurythmics, Stewart and Lennox—whose commanding vocals had more in common with Scottish blues rocker Maggie Bell than a New Popster like Clare Grogan—had briefly tasted success in a sixties-style guitar pop band called the Tourists. When that petered out, they remade themselves into an electronic duo. After briefly flirting with the experimental vanguard (the debut Eurythmics album, *In the Garden*, featured Can's Holger Czukay and D.A.F.'s Robert Görl), they quickly latched on to New Pop. On massive MTV hits such as "Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)," their sound and image was a canny composite of Grace Jones (the domineering vocals, the cropped haircut, the mannish build) and Kraftwerk (the icy electronics, the cyborg aura). The video for "Who's That Girl?" cleverly turned Bowie's gender-bent "Boys Keep Swingin'" inside out, with Lennox playing both male and female roles. At one point, Lennox's male and female personae kiss.

Underneath the modish patina of borrowed cool, though, Eurythmics' success depended on the thoroughly traditional strengths of Stewart's song craft and Lennox's soul power. Their album *Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)* even featured a cover of the Sam and Dave classic "Wrap It Up." "The music's timeless, you see," Stewart told *Rolling Stone*. "That's why we don't say we're part of this new English pop invasion. We just say we're in a continuum of what we've been doin' for ages. That's why on [British TV rock show] *The Whistle Test*...

they couldn't really call us a synth-pop duo, when we're standin' there with eight gospel singers, a grand piano and an acoustic guitar. That could have been in 1971, or it could be 1986." In this respect, they resembled Paul Young, another music biz veteran (he'd toiled for years in the soul revival troupe Q-Tips) who passed for New Pop by daubing Japan-style fretless bass all over recordings such as his big U.S. hit "Every Time You Go Away," the latter written by another blue-eyed soulster, Daryl Hall.

The success of all these R&B-inspired Brits made sense in a way, because the backstory to New Pop was actually a black story. African American innovations in rhythm, production, and arrangement (Chic, P-Funk, the Michael Jackson/Quincy Jones sound, the New York electro and synthfunk of the early eighties) had been assimilated by the perennially quicker-off-the-mark Brits and then sold back to white America. Fittingly, the American press heralded the 1983 breakthrough of New Music as "the Second British Invasion," a repeat of what happened in the sixties when the Beatles, Stones, Animals, and others sold American rhythm and blues back to white American teenagers.

Many of the Second British Invasion groups didn't just borrow from contemporary black music, they also rifled through sixties and seventies soul. Wham! and Culture Club were the classic examples of this mixture of retro and modern. Of all the New Pop groups, Wham! had the least investment in punk. George Michael and Andrew Ridgely were basically Southern England soul boys. After two brashly likable and contemporary-sounding U.K. hits, "Wham Rap" and "Young Guns (Go for It)," Wham! dominated the English summer of 1983 with *Make It Big!* and the singles "Bad Boys" and "Club Tropicana." Both were anthems of guilt-free hedonism for the aspirational youth of Southern England and the perfect peppy soundtrack to inaugurate Margaret Thatcher's second term as prime minister. But Wham! really cleaned up in America when they started to recycle Motown with bouncily popoptimistic tunes such as "Wake Me Up Before You Go Go" and "I'm Your Man."

Culture Club were more eclectic in their derivativeness, mashing together Motown, the Philly sound, and lover's rock. "Plagiarism is one of my favorite words," boasted Boy George. "Culture Club is the most sincere form of plagiarism in modern music. We just do it better than most." In another interview, he described himself as "not a great singer. I'm a vocalist and a copyist. I can copy and adapt." "Church of the Poisoned Mind" rehashed stomping sixties soul, "Time (Clock of the Heart)" harked back to Curtis Mayfield and the Spinners, and "Do You Really Want to Hurt Me" was like reggae balladeer Sugar Minott with one or two spoonfuls too many. What made such dilute fare so

massively successful was Boy George's charm, wit, and the novelty of his appearance, a cannily desexualized version of drag that mixed a hint of edge with a whole heap of harmless. Chubby and cuddly, androgynous George was an object of affection rather than desire. If he was subversive, George claimed, it wasn't because he was gay (usually coy about his leanings back then, at his most candid he admitted to being "bisexual") but because he was effeminate. Taking that teenybop tradition of pretty-boy idols one step further, Boy George was monstrously telegenic. The timing was perfect. *Kissing to Be Clever*, Culture Club's debut album, spawned three *Billboard* Top 10 hits. *Colour by Numbers*, their second album, spawned three more and went platinum. The group sealed their triumphant run of 1983 by winning a Grammy for Best New Artist.

The United States really was swamped by the Second British Invasion in 1983. Thirty-five percent of record sales that year came from U.K. artists, and at one point in July, six of the Top 10 singles were of British origin. Some of the biggest video hits of 1983 came from people barely known in the U.K., such as synth boffin Thomas Dolby and the bland dance rock outfit the Fixx. Even British old-timers came out of the woodwork: The Kinks, veterans of the first British Invasion, scored with "Come Dancing," while David Bowie had developed a whole new New Pop-oriented sound and image with "Let's Dance," switching from his decadent, cocaine-ravaged Berlin-era look to a tanned, healthy image.

Commentators were quick to attribute the Anglo-pop hegemony entirely to MTV, but radio played a big role by switching to New Music formats. Although MTV's success encouraged programmers to play more new records and less oldies, they were also inspired by certain pioneering radio stations such as KROQ, which became the most popular station in the Los Angeles area after changing its focus to "rock of the 80s" in 1981. KROQ's success was not lost on radio consultant Lee Abrams, who early in 1983 instructed the seventy album-oriented rock stations across America he advised to double the amount of New Music they played.

Fueled jointly by MTV and radio, this sudden surge of exposure for new music, foreign and domestic, caused record sales for the first half of 1983 to jump up by 10 percent, breaking the steady decline of the last three years. The high turnover of unfamiliar (to most Americans, anyway) names in the Top 10—Adam Ant, Kajagoogoo, Eddy Grant, Madness—added to the sense of revolutionary upheaval. MTV reaped the lion's share of the glory for being the savior of the record industry. A flood of pieces in mainstream magazines celebrated MTV and the Second British Invasion for bringing color and energy back to pop music. *Newsweek* placed Boy George and Annie Lennox on its front

cover. *Rolling Stone* did an “England Swings” special issue (George on the front page, again) and hailed 1983 as “the greatest year for rock since 1977.” If closely scrutinized, this was a slightly odd analogy given that punk totally failed in America, whereas New Pop reigned triumphant, but the general idea that a revolution was taking place was communicated.

Ironically, back in England, many people had a totally different feeling about 1983, seeing it as the year it all went wrong. Nostalgia for 1977 blossomed (hence Orange Juice’s Buzzcocks homage in “Rip It Up”) and the backlash against New Pop started to pick up pace. All around London, a graffiti slogan started to appear on walls: “Kill Ugly Pop.”

Thatcher’s reelection in June 1983 was a turning point. Many on the Left had hoped that her first electoral victory was a fluke and that the “natural order of things” would return. But in 1983 it became clear that the old postwar consensus about the welfare state and interventionist government (propping up ailing industries in order to preserve jobs) had shattered. A hefty portion of the population—enough to secure Thatcher the election—clearly didn’t give a shit about the unemployed. All of a sudden, the gulf between New Pop’s luxurious imagery and economic reality seemed unconscionable. This was especially the case for bands from the North, such as ABC, Heaven 17, and the Human League, where the ravaging of heavy industry had the most devastating effect on local economies and prospects for young people.

After touring the world as a sixteen-piece band, ABC came home and found Sheffield decimated by unemployment and heroin. The aspirational imagery they’d been using started to seem questionable. Moreover, the sonic opulence that only a year before had been a striking gesture was now the norm. Spandau Ballet aped “All of My Heart” with the slick schlock of “True” and topped the charts. Pangs of social conscience, an unwillingness to repeat a successful formula, and a desire to stay ahead of their imitators convinced ABC to take a total career swerve. Instead of *Lexicon of Love Part Two*, they made *Beauty Stab*, a hard, stripped-down album with electric guitar at its center and overtly political lyrics. “With *Beauty Stab*, we probably wanted to make a record like the Gang of Four, really,” says Fry. “It’s a protest album. You’ve had the Technicolor widescreen with *Lexicon*, now it’s back to Sheffield black-and-white documentary style.” Ironically, at this very moment Gang of Four were desperately trying to gloss up their sound ABC-style with the disastrously unconvincing *Hard*.

ABC trumpeted their new direction with the single “That Was Then, This Is Now.” But fans were confused by the new raw, live

sound. *Beauty Stab*'s ugly cover art of a matador fighting a bull gave the impression of a band that didn't really know what it was doing. Inside, unwieldy protest songs such as "King Money" and "United Kingdom" sounded glib and phony because Fry laid it on too thick with *Lexicon*-style wordplay ("This busted, rusted, upper-crusted, bankrupted, done and dusted, no-man-to-be-trusted United Kingdom"). In interviews, Fry did some pretty undignified backsliding, telling *NME*, "The way I see the world is very different from that quasi-Las Vegas/tuxedo period before," and claiming to have hung up his gold lamé suit. "There is too much gloss, too much technique in record making now," he declared.

ABC's Sheffield neighbors Heaven 17 and the Human League were also hit hard by what happened to their once prosperous hometown. Heaven 17's own mini-*Beauty Stab* was "Crushed by the Wheels of Industry," an exciting slice of electro-constructivist dance pop, by far the best thing on their second album, *The Luxury Gap*. They'd finally become pop stars, but at a terrible cost. Their breakthrough single, "Temptation," owed too much of its impact to the hired firepower of singer Carole Kenyon (1983 was the year of the obligatory black female backup singer), and ultimately just seemed part of the lavish bombast of the times. The Human League, meanwhile, were doubly tormented, first by the challenge of following up a megasuccess, and second by the sudden prick of conscience and consciousness. Perversely, or perhaps perceptively, Phil Oakey decided he wanted to make the Human League less like Abba and more like Pink Floyd, a band of "substance" dealing with serious issues, not silly love songs.

The spur for the Human League's attitude shift wasn't so much Thatcher-induced economic blight as the massacre of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. "I was baffled," Oakey says now. "They came on TV and told you something really incredible and horrible, and they didn't say what you could do about it." The song inspired by Oakey's sensations of paralysis, "The Lebanon," finally appeared as a single in May 1984. It was the herald for *Hysteria*, the group's disappointing sequel to *Dare*. Like ABC's "That Was Then," the single broke with the Human League's classic sound and "no standard instrumentation" manifesto and featured electric guitar prominently. Also like ABC's single, it failed to crack the U.K. Top 10.

Though they may have been aesthetic and commercial failures, "The Lebanon" and *Beauty Stab* were prophetic gestures. One could smell it on the breeze: the return of rock. Down in the various rock undergrounds, the early stirrings of a resurgence were taking shape. All those discredited concepts that New Pop tried to retire (authenticity, rebellion, community, transgression, resistance), along with all those outmoded sounds it had presumed dead and buried

(distorted electric guitar, the raw-throated snarl), were preparing to strike back. In America, especially, the counterinsurgency was already brewing.

MTV WAS ALLOWED TO BASK in the glory of 1983's pop boom for only a brief moment before the backlash against "English haircut bands" started in earnest. Within weeks of its "England Swings" special issue, *Rolling Stone* ran Steven Levy's "Ad Nauseam: How MTV Sells Out Rock and Roll." Levy's main theme, that videos were just commercials, was the media meme of the season, its closest rival for borderline triteness being the "videos asphyxiate your imagination" complaint. Another common accusation was that videos put power back in the hands of the corporate record industry. Even the most basic video, comprised of concert footage, cost \$15,000. Anything more creative could run anywhere from \$40,000 to \$200,000, way beyond the means of indie labels. However, the real animus behind Levy's closely reasoned tirade was the way MTV had shifted the playing field in ways that favored the image-conscious, surface-oriented Brits, making it much tougher for homegrown music with "real content" to prosper.

For American trad-rockers, the prevalence of synths and drum machines in Britpop exacerbated their gut conviction that the video fops just hadn't earned their success (synths and rhythm programming being nonstrenuous, white-collar work). Again, one heard the familiar Anglophobia/homophobia slippage that equated glamour and synths with effeminacy. Being the object of teenage female desire was intrinsically emasculating (and there was a psychosexual kernel underneath this prejudice, insofar as teen idols had traditionally been the protégés of gay managers, whose taste in boy toys coincided with teenage girls' idea of cuteness). For many, the MTV-triggered shift in radio formats from rock to pop felt like a calamitous power shift away from the taste of young males toward that of adolescent females.

Levy's *Rolling Stone* piece contrasted the eighties unfavorably with the sixties and found the Second British Invasion wanting in comparison with its precursor. "It is easy to get lost in the fun-house environment of MTV...[but] behind the fun-house mirror is another story, one that makes the musical energy and optimism of the Sixties seem a thousand light-years ago." Countercultural rock 'n' roll had been replaced by a video channel whose business was "to ensnare the passions of Americans who fit certain demographic or... 'psychographic' requirements—young people who had money and the inclination to buy [certain] things." This was a bit rich coming

from *Rolling Stone*, which by 1983 was hardly the vanguard of the revolution, or even cutting-edge music, and was certainly not the least bit averse to making bucks from generationally attuned advertising.

Still, other baby-boomer critics chimed in with this theme of New Pop as all style and no substance, edgeless and (in Levy's words) "culturally harmless." In a Christmas 1983 *NME* piece, former *Rolling Stone* staffer Greil Marcus fulminated against the invading Brits' recycled Bowie-isms and secondhand black American beats, declaring, "Never before has a pop phenomenon appeared rooted entirely in the notion of vapidty, on the thrill of surrender." All the Second British Invasion groups, he claimed, "will disappear and none will be remembered." In his essay "It's Like That: Rock and Roll on the Home Front," another sixties veteran rock critic, Dave Marsh, placed New Pop in the continuum of British imperialism. In his view, the U.K. bands "import a raw and precious commodity—usually some form of black music—and sell it back, in 'improved,' processed form, to its native country. The natives then consider this 'new' commodity an example of the wonders that the Empire has to offer them."

By the time Marsh wrote his nativist counterblast in 1984, a grassroots American intifada had been swelling for some time in the form of bands such as the Blasters, Violent Femmes, Blood on the Saddle, the Gun Club, and Lone Justice, who'd mostly come up through punk but by the early eighties had rediscovered various forms of American roots music such as country, blues, rockabilly, folk, and zydeco. Renegade rock historian Joe Carducci—no Anglophile himself—captured this inadvertently humorous backlash against "the limey fag-wave" well. Suddenly, he writes, it was "flag wavers vs fag-wavers.... Expunks and ex-new wavers were showing up in new bands trying to look like your average whiskey guzzlin', range ridin' shitkicker." The mainstream version of the New Americana soon followed: John Cougar Mellencamp, ex-Creedence Clearwater Revival singer John Fogerty, and above all Bruce Springsteen with his stupendously successful *Born in the U.S.A.*

At the time, this rapid resurgence of trad rock felt surprising, and for New Pop believers, disheartening. In hindsight, it appears inevitable. As Simon Frith argued, "The strength of the rock and roll tradition lay in its fantasy of the streets [in the case of the New Americana, you could substitute the great outdoors, the frontier, the wilderness].... The new pop music was, by contrast, mall music, shiny but confined. It is not surprising that the counter-sounds got louder and louder, that new myths developed of roots and region, history, authenticity. There is a limit to how long people can look as though they're having fun." That's a little unfair to the millions who loved New Pop and weren't *pretending* to have fun (not all of them teenage

girls, either). But pop culture works through a kind of oscillating internal pendulum, swinging back and forth between extremes. Some kind of return to rock values (if not necessarily to guitar music) was bound to happen. In the long run, it was hip-hop that gradually took on the role formerly occupied by rock as the locus of those concerns about roots and authenticity, those fantasies of rebellion and street knowledge—a role it has yet to relinquish.

In 1984, the British Invaders were pretty much in retreat. A few hung in there—Duran Duran, Wham!, Billy Idol—but overall it was a year in which American artists seized back *Billboard*. MTV didn't die with the New Music, though. On the contrary, it thrived like never before, because the new chart-ruling American stars—Cyndi Lauper, Prince, ZZ Top, Springsteen, and, by the end of '84, Madonna—had all grasped the power of video and adapted well to the new MTV reality. Musically, many American artists either learned or benefited from the climate created by New Pop. The rock-funk fusions of Michael Jackson's "Beat It" and most everything by Prince were American (and far more musically adept) versions of the disco-punk dreams of Brit New Popsters. As well as forging a signature video style that wittily compensated for the group's lack of sex appeal, ZZ Top made their boogie more dance floor friendly by adding a metronomic, sequencer-driven pulse. Van Halen scored their biggest hit with "Jump," driven by a synth riff rather than by Eddie Van Halen's guitar. Even that touchstone figure for the New Americana roots backlash, Bruce Springsteen, developed a new keyboard-dominated sound on singles such as "Dancing in the Dark." On the flip sides of the singles off *Born in the U.S.A.*, you could even find disco remixes from the likes of Arthur Baker, the electro pioneer who'd worked with New Order.

As American rockers grabbed hold of videos and synths, Devo—original homegrown pioneers of synthrock and video pop—found it harder to get on MTV. "Their playlist was suddenly based solely on what was already a radio hit, it had nothing to do with how good or innovative the video was," says Casale. The crunch came with the single "That's Good." Neither the tune nor the promo was Devo's finest hour. It was one of three same-looking and sounding video singles from their late 1982 *Oh, No! It's Devo* album, all shot on the same unattractively carpeted soundstage, in more or less the same outfits, with the same camera angles. The only things that vary are the animations on the blue-screen backdrop.

It was one of the animated sequences in "That's Good"—a french fry "fucking" a doughnut, juxtaposed with images of a half-naked, sweaty, and eventually dissatisfied porno babe—that brought Devo's deteriorating relationship with MTV to its breaking point. The programming director told the group, "You can have the french fry, or

you can have the doughnut, but you can't have both." Devo protested at first, then capitulated and re-edited the video. "By the time we got it back to them, they were looking at our 'adds' [the number of radio station playlists adding the single] and saying 'you're not getting enough,'" says Casale. "That's Good" never made the MTV playlist. Ultimately, says Mark Mothersbaugh, MTV "became the Home Shopping Network for record companies. And instead of showing the bands with innovative videos, they pushed the bands with the expensive, bloated videos."

JUST ABOUT THE FIRST POSTPUNK figure to start talking about pop as the way forward, Green Gartside was also just about the last of the New Pop fops to become a bona fide pop star. In an odd little coda to the Second British Invasion, Scritti Politti finally reached the *Billboard* Top 20 long after most of Green's Limey contemporaries, such as ABC and Heaven 17, had been driven from American airwaves.

After firing his former squatland comrades and abandoning the independent-label scene, Green signed to Virgin and teamed up with two Manhattan-based musicians, keyboardist/programmer David Gamson and drummer Fred Maher (formerly of Material). Inspired by New York's synthfunk and electro, Green and his dream team set about forging precision-tooled dance pop. All bright, chittering sequencer riffs and ultracrisp Linn beats, the new Scritti sound was *pointilliste*, a mosaic of hypersyncopations and microrhythmic intricacies. "We used to talk about it being like a Swiss watch," Green recalled.

"Wood Beez (Pray Like Aretha Franklin)," the first single from this third incarnation of Scritti, was released in early 1984 and became the U.K. Top 10 hit Green had craved for so long. "Wood Beez" and its even more stunning follow-up "Absolute" were still haunted by the old Scritti's melodic strangeness, still audible relatives of "PAs" and "Skank Bloc Bologna." But the sound of the records was slick, tough, and absolutely contemporary. Green had also finally worked out a way of writing lyrics that could pass for a normal love song. On closer inspection, though, they turned out to be pretzels of contradiction, with an *aporia* (the poststructuralist term for voids in the fabric of meaning) lurking in the center of every twist of language, sweet nothings that could wreck your heart.

"A Little Knowledge," for instance, was a love song about the impossibility of love, with the rapturously distraught Green concluding, "Now I know to love you is not to know you." "Wood

Beez” reprised the “Faithless” idea of losing belief but gaining soul, with Green crooning, “Each time I go to bed/I pray like Aretha Franklin.” For the secular Green, “soul” signified the sweet ache of an emptiness that was paradoxically also a fullness. In interviews Green described his pop songs as “hymns for agnostics, for the disillusioned like myself.” They were also tributes to the quasi-religious power of pop music, paeans that put into practice what they preached.

Scritti’s biggest U.K. single, the number six smash “The Word Girl,” was luscious lover’s rock that took a leaf out of Jacques Lacan’s book (literally, insofar as a page fragment from the French psychoanalyst’s *Ecrits* was reproduced on the twelve-inch single’s cover). The chorus, “How your flesh and blood became the word,” was both a question and an expression of wonder. Green, as always, was fascinated by the process in which an ordinary woman with flaws became idealized into a figment of the male romantic imagination (“a name for what you lose when it was never yours”), a de-realized fetish.

In the United States, the smash single was “Perfect Way,” which peaked at number eleven. Manager Bob Last fondly recalls the excitement of that moment in 1985 when Scritti finally “achieved this high-gloss sound that could penetrate mainstream American radio.” Indeed, the Scritti sound was so advanced it actually influenced the next wave of mideighties black pop, records such as Janet Jackson’s *Control*.

The accompanying album *Cupid & Psyche 85* finally fulfilled Green’s grandiose talk of the past several years. Not only was it immensely successful, but it was true pop deconstruction to bring a smile to Jacques Derrida’s lips. The new Scritti sound (all those dazzling surfaces) paralleled the way Green’s oddly depthless lyrics worked (the lover’s discourse as a lexical maze, a chain of foolishness along which desire traverses endlessly, hopelessly looking to heal the primal wound of lack at the heart of being). Inspired by Michael Jackson, Green had developed an eerie falsetto that sounded freakishly ethereal, beyond gender. It suited *Cupid*’s hall-of-mirrors sound, all perfect reflective surfaces for Green’s narcissism. It’s no coincidence that the inner sleeve to *Cupid* shows the immaculately groomed Green and his two cohorts in a deluxe men’s bathroom, staring into a mirror. Gamson and Maher are looking at Green’s reflection, but the singer only has admiring eyes for himself.

“When I met Derrida, he told me what I was doing was part of the same project of undoing and unsettling that he’s engaged in,” Green boasted in a 1988 interview, referring to a dinner with the philosopher arranged by French radio. Yet it’s doubtful that the subtle subversions woven into Scritti’s superslick sound were picked up on by most listeners. This was especially true of the American audience,

which wasn't familiar with the backstory of the band's tortuous journey toward pop and, seeing the video for "Perfect Way," most likely took Green to be just another fey, fair-haired pretty boy from England. On U.S. radio, surrounded by what Green called "the bright, brittle, endless barrage" of mideighties pop funk, it was hard to distinguish "Perfect Way" from any of the other cosmetically perfected, ultracommercial records of that era. Outside the context of indieland's frugal means, the expensiveness of the sound didn't carry any real resonance. Green angrily dismissed "any attempts to tie it to Thatcherism" as "nonsense," but it was hard to see how *Cupid* could be read in any other terms than straightforward upward mobility, especially when you factored in things such as the beautiful models used in "The Word Girl" video or the fact that Green himself did a modeling assignment for *Vogue*. Buying in or selling out, was there *really* a difference in the end?

**THE RETURN OF ROCK WITH GOTH AND THE NEW
PSYCHEDELIA**

THE GENEALOGY OF THE WORD “Gothic” encompasses medieval churches, Gothic literature and art, with their themes of death and the uncanny, and the original Goths, those Germanic barbarians who swarmed over the dying Roman Empire. When applied to postpunk, however, “Gothic” initially described a certain doomy atmosphere in music. In 1979, Martin Hannett described Joy Division as “dancing music with Gothic overtones.” Quite rapidly, though, “Gothic” became a term of abuse applied to bands such as Bauhaus that had emerged in the wake of Joy Division and Siouxsie and the Banshees. It remained an insult until the latter months of 1982, when the word was reclaimed as a tribal rallying cry. Darkness suddenly looked like an alluring alternative to New Pop’s squeaky-clean, overground brightness.

And yet Goth and New Pop actually had something in common. Both had roots in glam. ABC and the Human League loved Roxy and Bowie, but so did Goth groups such as Bauhaus and Sex Gang Children. New Pop and Goth both represented a return to glamour and stardom and a backlash against postpunk’s antimystique. Whether it was the Human League’s celebration of romance or Goth’s patchouli-scented romanticism, 1982 saw the return of that old (black) magic.

The vortex of the early Goth scene was the Batcave, a Soho nightclub that started in July 1982 as an “absolutely no funk” alternative to the New Romantic and imported black dance fare offered at other London clubs. Founded by the campy group Specimen, the Batcave favored a leather-and-lace decor and thirties monster movie references. As the club took off, it went on tour to the provinces, inspired imitators, and franchised Batcave nights in cities all over the U.K., as well as a one-off night at Danceteria in New York.

Goth came to prominence in the winter of 1982–83, just at the point when New Pop was getting fat and bland. Virtually unknown outside the U.K. live circuit, Southern Death Cult abruptly materialized on *NME*’s front cover in October ’82. Early in the new year, another *NME* cover story proclaimed the arrival of “Positive Punk.” Loosely tied to two rising Goth groups, Brigandage and Blood and Roses, the piece essentially celebrated the victory of imagination and individuality against a vaguely conjured mediocrity. The article’s epigram, stolen from *The Rocky Horror Show*’s Dr. Frank-N-Furter, was “Don’t dream it, be it.”

By 1983, bands such as Danse Society, the March Violets, Flesh for Lulu, and scores more swarmed across the independent charts. Soon

almost every independent label had a Goth band on its roster. Goth's tentacles stretched from the Los Angeles "death rock" scene centered around Christian Death and 45 Grave to Iceland's Kukl (the name translated as "sorcery"), who sang about the country's pagan mythology and whose lineup included Björk.

As with other successful subcultures, Goth style created plenty of scope for individual expression while simultaneously marshaling a potent tribal identity. Its palette of sonic and sartorial hallmarks meant you could recognize a Goth group within seconds of seeing and hearing them. Standard musical fixtures included scything guitar patterns, high-pitched post-Joy Division basslines that usurped the melodic role, beats that were either hypnotically dirgelike or "tribal" in some ethnically indeterminate Burundi-meets-Apache way, and vocals that were either near operatic and Teutonic or deep, droning alloys of Jim Morrison and Ian Curtis. The Goth image entailed some combination of deathly pallor, teased or ratted black hair, ruffled Regency shirts, stovepipe hats, leather garments, and spiked dog collars, accessorized with religious, magical, or macabre silver jewelry. The clothing color scheme was funereal, the sense of glamour literally sepulchral.

Connecting everything was the romance of *old things*. The original Gothic movement in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century literature had been antimodernist. It represented the return of the repressed: all the medieval superstitions and primordial longings allegedly banished by the Industrial Revolution, all those shadowy regions of the soul supposedly illuminated by the Enlightenment. The new Goth was likewise based on the idea that the most profound emotions you'll ever feel are the same ones felt by people thousands of years ago, the fundamental, eternal experiences of love, death, despair, awe, and dread.

Goth's interest in the timeless could be seen as precisely that, a refusal of the timely, an apolitical flight from the urgent topical issues of the day. In its early days, Goth was shaped in reaction to the two other strands that came directly out of U.K. punk, Oi! and anarcho-punk, both of which addressed exploitation and injustice. The Oi! or "real punk" contingent (bands such as the Exploited and Cockney Rejects) defined punk as rabble-rousing protest grounded in working-class experience. The anarcho-punk movement, focused around the band Crass and their label of the same name, was more ideological, spewing out vinyl tracts denouncing the unholy trinity of state, church, and military while extolling pacifism and self-government.

Up to a point, the proto-Goths enjoyed the energy at Oi! and anarcho-punk gigs. But ultimately, says Goth historian Mick Mercer, "A lot of the people who became Goths wanted the excitement of punk

but not the mundane element.” Redefining punk rebellion as deviance from norms, these proto-Goths proposed an escape from the crushing commonplaceness of everyday English life, into ritual and ceremony, magic and mystery. They latched on to any groups they could find “who offered something a bit more intelligent and twisted, Romantic and tortured,” says Mercer, groups such as the Birthday Party and Siouxsie and the Banshees.

The intersection point between Goth and New Pop was Adam Ant. The original Antz were proto-Goth. Their songs tweaked taboos and unveiled kinky desires, and the “sex music for antpeople” concept was overtly tribal. Goth put a high premium on physical beauty, be it natural or aided by self-adornment and makeup, and Adam was the first in a long line of hunky Goth singers that included Bauhaus’ Peter Murphy and Southern Death Cult’s Ian Astbury. The other Goth hallmark Adam possessed was the charismatic aura of the cult leader, mingling various aspects of warrior chieftain, shaman, and savior.

But when Adam, impatient to become a big star, “sold out” and went pop, his original fan base defected. The ambitious Adam declared that “cult” was just a euphemism for “failure,” but the Goth groups, in contrast, cultivated cultishness, understanding that their audience wanted bands they could cling to as private property. “Bauhaus picked up a lot of disaffected Antz fans,” says Mercer. Bauhaus’ debut, *In a Flat Field*, came out on November 5, 1980, the day before *Kings of the Wild Frontier*. Antz fans who didn’t care for Adam’s new storybook imagery of pirates and Indians turned instead to Bauhaus’ hammy glam theater of blasphemy and idolatry.

Curiously, it was Malcolm McLaren, the person who’d given Adam the image makeover, who best understood this impulse. Predicting the return of rock’s underground spirit as a backlash against New Pop, McLaren celebrated the die-hard loyalty of metal fans. “Led Zeppelin never appeared on television or radio, yet they sold more records at that time than any other group!” he told *Sounds* in December 1982. “They *made sure* their music was outside the area of manufactured pop product.”

Banshees’ singer Siouxsie Sioux crystallized the emerging Goth movement’s spirit when she declared her desire to be “a thorn in the side of mediocrity.” In the very beginning, though, the Banshees were exemplary postpunk vanguardists, spouting the rock-is-dead rhetoric of the time. Bassist Steve Severin saw rock as “flaccid and perverted,” and in interviews cited influences—Velvets, Roxy, Can, Beefheart—similar to those of their postpunk contemporaries. The Banshees’ sound took shape through a process of reduction and rejection. “It was a case of us knowing what we *didn’t* want, throwing out every cliché,” says Severin. “Never having a guitar solo, never ending a song with a

loud drum smash.”

Siouxsie wanted a guitar sound like “a cross between the Velvet Underground and the shower scene in *Psycho*,” says Severin. Early on, the Banshees were often lumped in with Wire, kindred spirits in angularity and emaciated minimalism. Both groups were big fans of flange—a glassy, brittle guitar sound created by a device that doubles the musical signal and then puts the “shadow” guitar slightly out of phase with the main signal. The Banshees used its cold swirl to draw a sharp line separating what they were doing from seventies rock. Heard on their 1978 debut, *The Scream*, the result was stark and serrated, a mortification of rock, a new cruel geometry achieved *within* and *against* the orthodox guitar/bass/drums format.

Siouxsie’s ice queen voice was equally forbidding, piercing the listener’s flesh like a lance, and it suited the songs. Jagged and jarring, the Banshees’ tunes could be catchy (“Hong Kong Garden,” their debut single, reached number seven in the U.K.), but they didn’t *feel* melodic. The lyrics, alternately penned by Severin and Siouxsie, espoused a brutally unsentimental view of the world (“Love in a void/It’s so numb/Avoid in love/It’s so dumb”) relieved only by macabre humor. “Carcass,” for instance, concerned a butcher’s assistant who falls in love with a lump of meat and amputates his own limbs on the meat grinder to more closely resemble his beloved.

Siouxsie defined punk not in political terms but as “disrupting yourself, questioning yourself,” which generally translated as a morbid preoccupation with the dark side of human nature, obsession, unreason, and extreme mental states. Severin’s “Jigsaw Feeling” imagined what it felt like to be autistic, while Siouxsie’s “Suburban Relapse” is a darkly witty sketch of a housewife having a breakdown: “Whilst finishing a chore/I asked myself ‘What for?’” Siouxsie observed, “You look at these homes and realize how many of the women are out of their minds within these pruned rose gardens. There’s something about the containment of emotion within suburbia.”

Severin and Siouxsie knew suburbia intimately. They grew up in neighboring towns on the southernmost fringe of London. But the pair actually met on the other side of the city, at a Roxy Music concert at Wembley Arena in 1974. Glam fans, they had no truck with punk’s do-it-yourself egalitarianism. “Anyone *can’t* do it,” quips Severin. The Banshees believed in maintaining an enigmatic distance from the audience, both offstage (“That whole concept of the Clash letting their fans stay in their hotel rooms,” chuckles Severin, “I mean, no, we’d let them stay out in the rain!”) and in performance. “There’s something magical about a stage,” muses Severin. “You think of all your favorite people, such as the Doors, and you can’t imagine them being the

blokes next door. The stage is their church. That's what appealed about the intelligent side of glam, the fact that there was some kind of theater going on, a drama was being presented."

This side of the Banshees emerged on 1979's *Join Hands* with "Icon" and the protracted "cover version" of "The Lord's Prayer," songs that set the template for Goth as a modern pagan cult tapping into atavistic pre-Christian urges. "With 'Icon' we were trying to create music that you could get lost in, an intensity of sound that was hypnotic, ritualistic," says Severin. The song is loosely inspired by the story of a Polish priest who set fire to himself, but sounds more like a hymn to Siouxsie, an "icon in the fire" of Goth desire.

After an early personnel upheaval—the defection of drummer Kenny Morris and guitarist John McKay—the Banshees recruited the more conventionally skilled John McGeoch (formerly the guitarist in Magazine) and drummer Budgie for *Kaleidoscope*. As the title suggests, *Kaleidoscope* shifted from the monochrome severity of the first two albums to a more vivid palette of textures. The Banshees even sounded pretty on U.K. hit singles "Christine" and "Happy House." But 1981's *Juju* was the Banshees' most perfect statement, every song a chip off the same lustrous jet-black block. The album blueprinted an absurdly large proportion of Goth's musical and lyrical themes. With "Sin in My Heart," "Voodoo Dolly," "Halloween," "Spellbound," and "Night Shift," the Banshees explored ideas of magic and the supernatural for the first time.

In 1982 the Banshees recorded two songs that were virtual Goth manifestos. On "Fireworks," Siouxsie chants, "We are fireworks," an exultant image of self-beautification as a glam gesture flashing against the murk of mundanity. "Painted Bird," from *A Kiss in the Dreamhouse*, paid homage to the Banshees' audience, inciting them to "Confound that dowdy flock with a sharp-honed nerve/Because we're painted birds by our own design." Its inspiration was Jerzy Kozinski's novel of the same title, the protagonist of which collects birds. "When he was feeling really aggressive or frustrated," Siouxsie explained, "he'd paint this bird with different colors, and then throw it to its flock. And it would recognize its flock, but because it was a different color, they would attack it."

From its bejeweled, Klimt-inspired cover imagery to its exquisite textures, 1982's *Dreamhouse* marked the Banshees' plunge into fin de siècle decadence. Musically, the influences were English psychedelia: the Beatles, Syd Barrett, Traffic, and the Gothic-bucolic Donovan of "Hurdy Gurdy Man" and "Season of the Witch." "*Dreamhouse* really started with the words for 'Cascade,'" says Severin. The imagery of "liquid falling" seemed to demand the melting of Siouxsie the ice queen and the unveiling of a hitherto suppressed side to the Banshees:

deliquescent, sensuous, and on “Melt!” (their first-ever ballad) languidly erotic. Circa *The Scream*, the Banshees’ music was “sexy” like J. G. Ballard’s *Crash*. But now, inspired partly by Severin’s reading of Ballard’s latest book, *The Unlimited Dream Company*—“where the imagery is very lush, sensual, exotic,” he says—the Banshees were making the perfect seduction soundtrack.

Their most adventurous and varied album, *Dreamhouse* nonetheless signaled that the Banshees had outgrown the Goth audience they’d helped to create. They closed out 1983 with *Nocturne*, a live double album recorded at the Royal Albert Hall. The Banshees had become too popular in a mainstream sense to remain the focus of cult love, the essence of Goth. Around this point, Robert Smith became the Banshees’ guitarist. His own group, the Cure, was closer to Goth lite, steeped in existentialist sources similar to Joy Division (the early Cure single “Killing an Arab” was inspired by Camus’s *The Stranger*), but replacing Ian Curtis’s barely disguised death wish with Smith’s despondency and doubt. Attractive on 1979’s translucent-sounding *Seventeen Seconds*, the Cure’s sound became a dolorous fog on *Faith* and *Pornography*. Smith’s withdrawn vocals, the listless beat, and the gray-haze guitars made for some of the most neurasthenic rock music ever committed to vinyl. These oppressively dispirited albums cemented the Cure’s Goth stature and laid the foundation for their megacult following among suburbia’s lost dreamers.

At the furthest extreme from the Cure’s mild version of Gothic despair lay the Dionysian conflagration of the Birthday Party. *Prayers on Fire*, released in 1981, opened with the tribal bedlam of “Zoo-Music Girl.” The punk-funk love song oscillates violently between devotion and devouring, sacred and profane, offering a vision of “romance” that’s less Nelson Riddle and more Antonin Artaud: “I murder her dress till it hurts...Oh! God! Please let me die beneath her fists.”

The Birthday Party originally moved to London from Melbourne, Australia, expecting the U.K. to be ablaze with tempestuously innovative groups such as the Pop Group, only to be bitterly disappointed by the cooler direction postpunk had taken. Shelving their well-thumbed copies of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, they veered in a deliberately American direction. When singer Nick Cave and guitarist Rowland S. Howard listed their “consumer faves” in *NME*, the list included *Wise-blood*, Johnny Cash, Robert Mitchum in *Night of the Hunter*, Morticia from *The Addams Family*, and Lee Hazelwood. Cave was one of the first songwriters to reject postpunk’s ultrarational, antireligious tenor and use Old Testament imagery of sin, retribution, and damnation. Birthday Party’s 1982 release, *Junkyard*, teemed with American Gothic imagery of Kewpie dolls and evangelist’s murdered daughters. Comic artist Ed Roth did the album cover, a drooling

monster at the wheel of a fire-spewing dragster. Howard said the band liked Roth's work because it "conjures sort of an inarticulacy...and that's one of the great things about rock music. You don't have to be thrusting your intelligence into people's faces all the time. If you're really smart you know when it's appropriate to be dumb."

Between the decrepit blues of "She's Hit," the death rattle 'n' roll of "Big Jesus Trashcan," and the roiling quagmire of the title track, 1982's *Junkyard* sounded like the living end of rock music, its final testament. Amazingly, the Birthday Party retched up two more brilliant EPs, *The Bad Seed* and *Mutiny*. High points included the Disney-noir talking trees of "Deep in the Woods," the Faulkner-meets-*Deliverance* horror of "Swampland," and "Mutiny in Heaven," Cave's blasphemous vision of a corrupt and derelict heaven riddled with trash and rats, which the group matched with their most three-dimensionally vivid music, a soundscape teeming with gargoyles and bubbling with putrescence. In Goth terms, though, the Birthday Party's most influential song was the 1981 single "Release the Bats," an almost campy stampede of vampire sex that topped the U.K. independent charts. The advertisement for "Release" declared, "Dirtiness is next to antigodliness."

Bauhaus' own vampire anthem, 1979's "Bela Lugosi's Dead," is generally identified as the ground zero of Goth proper. Singer Peter Murphy's striking looks—teeteringly tall, gaunt, with a bruised pout and perfect cheekbones—made him a Goth pinup, the ultimate erotic enigma. But what came out of those luscious lips was portentous and preposterous, an overblown farrago of sex and death, religion and blasphemy, uttered in a voice that virtually cloned David Bowie's. Raised Catholic, Murphy kicked back against his upbringing with sacrilegious ditties such as "Stigmata Martyr," which featured him reciting, "In the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit" in Latin, accompanied in concert by simulated crucifixion postures.

With their shock rock gestures and Grand Guignol grotesquerie, Bauhaus were actually far closer to Alice Cooper than Bowie—exciting, but difficult to take seriously. They had a superb grasp of rock as theater, using stark white lighting to cast dramatic shadows. "It's important to go to the theatre and escape from the street, use the space, find another element," Murphy declared. Although their albums tended to sag under the weight of pretension, Bauhaus made flashy, thrilling singles, such as the dark, twisted art funk of "A Kick in the Eye" and the swirling vaporous mystery of "Spirit." Daniel Ash's guitar sound bore comparison with Gang of Four or Joy Division at their most harsh and hacking, especially on Bauhaus' early postpunk-aligned efforts such as "Terror Couple Kill Colonel" and "Bela Lugosi's Dead," with its fret-scraping guitar scree and metallic dub effects.

If Bauhaus, the Banshees, and the Birthday Party were the crucial groups that bridged postpunk and Goth, Killing Joke was the fourth cornerstone of the Goth sound and sensibility. Like the other three bands, they started out as postpunk experimentalists. In Killing Joke's case, that meant following PiL's lead. In 1980, singer/keyboardist Jaz Coleman talked of wanting to keep the funk but strip away disco's "sugarshit" sheen, replacing it "with mangled, distorted, searing noise." This element came from guitarist Geordie, who transformed Keith Levene's sound into something sulphuric, inhumane, practically inhuman. Coleman added jabs of atonal synth and electronic hums, along with the barked menace of his vocals, which sounded like he was choking on his own fury. "Tension music," the group called it.

Initially, Killing Joke seemed vaguely political. Their striking seven-inch sleeves and micro-ads in the U.K. music press grabbed the eye with images of the pope receiving a Nazi salute from German troops or a top-hatted Fred Astaire tap dancing over a trench full of World War I corpses. The name Killing Joke, explained Coleman, condensed their whole worldview into a single phrase, "the feeling of a guy in the First World War who's just about to run out the trenches...and he knows his life is going to be gone in ten minutes and he thinks of that fucker back in Westminster who put him in that position. That's the feeling that we're trying to project—the Killing Joke."

Jaz Coleman was an unlikely protest singer, though. A high-caste Brahman Indian on his mother's side, Coleman was wealthy, well educated, and musically trained (after Killing Joke he became a classical composer). In almost pointed contrast to Coleman's accomplishment, Killing Joke was conceived as a barbarian entity. Paul Ferguson's beats were tribal and turbulent. Starting with their second album, *What's THIS For...!* and reaching fruition on 1982's awesome *Revelations*, Killing Joke shook off the PiL influence (all the dub and death disco trappings) and emerged as something closer to Black Sabbath: doomy, tribalistic rock that exulted in its visions of darkness and apocalypse.

Coleman saw Killing Joke's music as "warning sounds for an age of self-destruction." The end was nigh ("I'll give it eighteen months," he said in 1981), but Coleman was glad. The aftermath was "the period of time I'm looking towards at the moment," he said, when a new, brutally instinct-attuned *uncivilization* would emerge phoenixlike from the smoking ruins. Coleman told *NME*, "I see a more *savage* world ahead, right? It's music that inflames the heart." Fire was Killing Joke's favorite of the four elements. They even recruited a fire eater, Dave the Wizard, to do his act onstage with the band. "Fire to me is symbolic of the will power," declared Jaz. "I think the power of

the individual is really underestimated.” Yet it seemed more the case that Killing Joke’s music exalted the power of the mob.

Goth’s appeal to the irrational and primal could sometimes stray into troubling territory, something Killing Joke exemplified. Coleman’s rhetoric—reveling in male energy, describing war as the natural state of the world, jubilantly heralding Armageddon—veered unnervingly close to that dodgy zone between Nietzschean and Nazi. “The violence that Killing Joke is about is not violence on the immediate level but the *mass* violence, the violence bubbling underneath your feet, the violence of nature throwing up,” Coleman solemnly proclaimed. “And we *become* that violence.” Even some Goths felt there was a faintly fascist aura to the vibe catalyzed by Killing Joke at their gigs.

Latent Nazi tendencies were a source of anxiety in the Goth scene. The flirtation with fascist imagery can be traced back to Siouxsie (who in her early days wore a swastika and sang the unforgivable line “too many Jews for my liking”) and Joy Division. The March Violets took their moniker from the German nickname for those opportunists who joined the Nazi Party in the spring of 1934, after Hitler declared himself führer. Nazi innuendos dogged the early career of Kirk Brandon of Theatre of Hate. It didn’t help that Brandon looked like an Aryan pinup and sang operatically, that early Hate releases came out on the SS label, and that the band’s gigs were often preceded by a tape of Wagner’s “The Ride of the Valkyries.” Brandon’s allegorical anthems such as “Do You Believe in the Westworld?” strove to make epic political statements, but were fatally garbled, their sympathies open to conjecture. All that really came through loud and unclear was the singer’s desire to push himself forward as a messianic leader. “We’re not a band, we’re a movement,” he declared.

Any suspect totalitarian leanings were mostly held in check by Goth’s opposing attraction to Aleister Crowley’s libertine dictum, “Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the law.” Curiously, given Goth’s attraction to all things forbidden, drugs weren’t especially important on the scene. Rather, the overall vibe of debauchery focused on sexual fetishism and vampy attire—fishnet stockings, black leather thigh-high boots, witchy eye makeup. With its emphasis on self-beautification, the Goth movement connected powerfully with women. “To this day, it’s got a bigger involvement of females than any other subculture,” claims Mick Mercer. Yet the hefty presence of women in the audience didn’t prevent Goth’s rapid degeneration into a sort of postpunk version of that most macho of genres, heavy metal.

The early Goths tended to share the postpunk mind-set of the Banshees. “Rock ‘n’ roll” was something to be discarded, left for dead. But the Sisters of Mercy were defiantly rockist. Fans of the Birthday

Party, they followed that group's lead in embracing American imagery and rejecting the Europeanism of New Pop. "There's an awful lot of dreadful bands coming out of England, especially London," the Sisters' singer/conceptualist Andrew Eldritch declared in 1983. "A lot of them come onstage with this, 'We are not a rock band' rubbish. So we go the other way—one step forward. We say 'we *are* a rock band.' Very loudly."

This was fighting talk at a time when much of the London-based music media celebrated anything and everything so long as it wasn't rock. Whether from overseas (Washington, D.C., go-go, New York electro, African music) or homegrown (the faux jazz Sade, the faux salsa of zoot-suited buffoons Blue Rondo A La Turk, the faux everything of Paul Weller's Style Council), the only thing the disparate mélange of hipster fare in 1983 had in common was the absence of power chords and fuzztone. Aghast at this brave new world in which Nina Simone was a hallowed icon but Iggy was a forgotten boy, the Sisters of Mercy declared war on pop.

An Oxford-educated intellectual, Eldritch admired heavy metal's stupidity and "relentlessness." His band treated rock less as an evolving musical form than a repertoire of mannerisms and imagery (sunglasses after dark, speed-emaciated bodies clothed all in black). Displaying a weak grasp of how rock works as a physically involving music, the Sisters used a drum machine instead of a real drummer, while their guitar was atmospheric but insubstantial, the aural counterpart to the dry ice they shrouded themselves with onstage (a knowingly corny attempt at mystery).

The Sisters of Mercy's "Temple of Love" was *the* Goth anthem of 1983. Its closest rival was "Fatman" by Southern Death Cult, which reached number one on the indie charts that spring. Even by Goth's deteriorating standards, "Fatman" was a poor excuse for rock. But in some sense, the music was almost irrelevant. Through touring in support of Theatre of Hate, and later Bauhaus, Southern Death Cult picked up the slack left by those groups and by others, such as Killing Joke and the Banshees, when they'd split or gone mainstream.

Southern Death Cult resembled a cross between Bow Wow Wow and Led Zeppelin. They had the tribal tom-tom rhythms, and singer Ian Astbury wore a mohawk just like Annabella's, along with feather and chicken bone necklaces (a jewelry collection that expanded with each visit to KFC). Astbury had actually spent five years in Canada as a youth, during which time he'd visited American Indian reservations. Returning to the U.K. just in time for punk, he became totally involved in 1977's revolution. When punk died, Astbury felt rudderless and turned to Native American culture for spiritual sustenance. The name Southern Death Cult itself came from a Mississippi Valley tribe that

maintained burial mounds and shrines.

Undergoing various lineup changes, SDC turned first into Death Cult, and then the Cult. With the jettisoning of “Death” went the group’s remaining Gothic vestiges. With amazing speed and shamelessness, the Cult devolved into straightforward long-haired cock rockers. The reference points were of late-sixties and early-seventies vintage: the Doors, Steppenwolf, Led Zep. A vague aura of quest clung to song titles such as “Revolution” and “Spiritwalker.” But by 1985 the Cult essentially became everything the Sex Pistols and punk had aimed to destroy. Singer Ian Astbury was last seen in the company of Ray Manzarek and Robbie Krieger, performing as a surrogate Jim Morrison in the rock nostalgia outfit, the New Doors.

IF GOTH TOOK ONE ROUTE from postpunk back to loud and proud rock, Echo and the Bunnymen followed another: not descending into the darkness but soaring into the light. The celestial drive of their crystal guitars and beseeching vocals suggested a quest for some kind of grail or glory. In the band’s early days, the Bunnymen’s lead singer, Ian McCulloch, was himself often compared to Jim Morrison. His baritone had a similar rich timbre and grandeur, but he also possessed a purehearted adolescent quality that the Doors’ singer had rapidly lost through self-abuse and self-aggrandizement. When the Liverpool band first hit the scene in 1979, they were considered harbingers of the “new psychedelia,” despite the fact that in those days they never ingested anything more deranging than pints of ale. Later, the Bunnymen were identified with what some called the “Big Music”—a style of purified eighties rock that was postpunk in its minimalism, yet redolent of the sixties in its feeling of transcendence—alongside groups such as the Waterboys and Simple Minds. But of all their contemporaries, it was U2, the Bunnymen’s rivals, who ultimately took the Big Music sound and made it *big*.

The template for that sound was laid down by Television, who were either the last sixties group or the first to make eighties rock. One of the seminal bands from New York’s midseventies CBGB scene, Television actually had a much bigger impact in Britain than in America. *NME* predicted that the group’s singer and lead guitarist Tom Verlaine would dominate the next decade like Bob Dylan had the sixties. Television even had a couple of U.K. hit singles. In a weird way, Verlaine and Television’s second guitarist, Richard Lloyd, showed British bands the path to a non-American future for electric guitar, insofar as their playing owed little to Chuck Berry or the blues greats. Hearing Television’s 1977 debut, *Marquee Moon*, “was just such

a throw-down to me,” U2’s guitarist the Edge said. “The electric guitar had really become such an unoriginal-sounding instrument.” For all their transcendental song titles, such as “Elevation,” “Glory,” and “The Dream’s Dream,” there was nothing wispily hippie-dippy about the New York band’s music. It was diamond hard, a music of fierce purity. You can hear the reverberations of Television’s plangent sound all across eighties British music, but nowhere more richly than on Echo and the Bunnymen’s first two albums, *Crocodiles* and *Heaven Up Here*.

Listening to 1980’s *Crocodiles*, the first thing you notice is how sparse the sound is. Les Pattinson’s granite basslines carry the melody, Will Sergeant’s jagged quartz guitar leaves lots of empty space while avoiding anything resembling a solo, and Pete De Freitas’s minimal drumming is all surging urgency. Then you marvel at the precocious authority and poise of McCulloch’s singing. Many of the Bunnymen’s songs are rooted in doubt, anguish, despair—“Is this the blues I’m singing?” wonders McCulloch on “Rescue”—but the tightness and brightness of the Bunnymen’s sound transmits contradictory sensations of confidence, vigor, elation.

The Bunnymen’s audience overlapped with Joy Division’s—those overcoat-clad young men with the weight of the world on their shoulders—and in some ways *Heaven Up Here* feels like an answer record to the previous year’s *Closer*. It is harrowed by the same things: hypocrisy, distrust, betrayal, lost or frozen potential. In “The Disease,” McCulloch sings about how his life could change “just given a chance,” then pleads, “If you get yours from heaven/Don’t waste it.” But whereas *Closer* shows Ian Curtis fatally mesmerized by his own dread visions, *Heaven Up Here* ultimately turns its face toward the light. “We have no dark things,” declares McCulloch on “No Dark Things,” pointedly renouncing Gothic gloom and doom, and a few songs later, the album goes out with the blasting euphoria of “All I Want,” a celebration of desire for desire’s sake.

Filling out their spare sound with guitar overdubs, keyboard glints, vocal multitracking, and atmospheric vapors, the sheer majesty of *Heaven Up Here* put Liverpool back on rock’s map in a way it hadn’t been since the Beatles. Unlike other British cities, from the outside Liverpool looked like it hadn’t really responded to punk. In reality, the upheaval of 1976 *did* galvanize Liverpool’s live music scene, which had been stagnant during the early seventies. “But the city never produced a classic punk group or anything like Oi!,” says Paul Du Noyer, *NME*’s Liverpool correspondent at that time. Nor did postpunk flourish there, at least not the kind of experimental sounds that came out of London, Sheffield, and Leeds, such as industrial synth noise, avant-funk, and apocalyptic dub.

“All that postpunk vanguard stuff, we’d just think that was

completely *stupid*,” says Bill Drummond, who managed Echo and the Bunnymen and cofounded the pioneering Liverpool indie label Zoo. According to Drummond, it’s not so much that Liverpool music had to be tuneful—“it had to be a *celebration*. McCulloch’s lyrics were often angst laden, but there was a gloriousness to the music.” One could say exactly the same about the two other leading postpunk groups to come from Liverpool during this period: Wah! Heat, with their ringing chords and endless crescendos, and the neopsychedelic outfit the Teardrop Explodes, whose singer, Julian Cope, described the band’s songs as “cries of joy.”

Cope, McCulloch, and Wah! front man Pete Wylie were originally in a “band” together. The Crucial Three existed mostly as a figment of bragging and gossip. They only wrote a couple of songs and never played a gig. This sort of phantom band—the Mystery Girls, the Nova Mob, A Shallow Madness—was a peculiar hallmark of Liverpool. Almost every significant person on the incestuous scene was involved in a group with every other significant figure at one point or another. “People enjoyed the role-playing aspect,” says Du Noyer. “They liked the process of naming groups and conceptualizing around groups more than the grind of getting equipment together and rehearsing.”

The entire Liverpool scene clustered around the punk club Eric’s, which served as the laboratory for the city’s future stars, including the band Big in Japan. Formed by Drummond, its ranks included the charismatic glam punkette Jayne Casey along with future Banshee drummer Budgie, future Frankie Goes to Hollywood singer Holly Johnson, future Lightning Seed/record producer Ian Broudie, and future Zoo cofounder/Teardrop keyboardist/music biz mogul Dave Balfe. Romping somewhere at the intersection of Roxy, *Rocky Horror*, and the zany, garish Scottish pop-punk band the Rezillos, Big in Japan were “an explosion of color,” says Drummond. “We totally went for it onstage. And were totally embarrassing.”

Unlike the Leeds groups—Gang of Four’s ambivalence about entertainment, the Mekons’ cultivated ordinariness—the Liverpool postpunks had no embarrassment about their desire to be famous. “Stars are stars and they shine so hard,” McCulloch sang on *Crocodiles*’s “Stars Are Stars.” The lyrics are typical Bunnymen widescreen imagery, but McCulloch could equally be singing about his feelings about rock’s firmament—a mixture of awe and absolute confidence that he’ll be up there, too, sooner rather than later. Obsessed with Bowie (for a period he insisted on being called Duke, as in Thin White Duke), McCulloch spent his teenage years feeling as if “there was this big movie camera in the sky,” he said. “The first line in ‘Going Up’ on *Crocodiles*—and it’s a terrible line—is ‘Ain’t thou watching my film.’ It was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but that was

what spurred me on.”

McCulloch didn't particularly look like star material in the early days. Appallingly shortsighted, he wore “aviator blue-tinted glasses, really crap, and often with tape at the corner 'cause they were also falling to bits,” recalls Drummond. But behind his spectacles and shyness, he was a natural. Luminously pretty, luscious-lipped and tousled, he'd also been perfecting the art of presence and projection through many narcissistic hours of self-contemplation before a mirror. McCulloch was so certain of his destiny that he skipped the opportunity to go to college and spent two years doing nothing, just waiting for the absolutely perfect group to coalesce around him. And it did.

NME's readers voted Echo and the Bunnymen the number two group in the country in early 1982, while decreeing *Heaven Up Here* to be the previous year's best album. This was essentially an anti-New Pop protest vote by postpunk's silent majority, who'd chafed during the past year when it seemed that anything and everything was hip except made-in-Britain, all-male guitar bands, the one thing *they* actually liked. The Bunnymen were effectively picking up the slack left by the demise of Joy Division. But they weren't alone. U2 also placed well in various readers' charts.

Not coincidentally, around this time, Ian McCulloch started to make bitchy comments about U2, describing their anthemic songs as “music for plumbers and bricklayers” while boasting that the Bunnymen were “an oceans and mountains band.” Behind the dissing lay an astute perception of threat. U2 were the Bunnymen's nearest rivals when it came to capturing that post-Joy Division audience. True, some of the abandoned flock had joined in New Pop's celebration of shiny surface pleasures. “What's been called the ‘new pop mentality’ is a *resignation*,” suggested Andy McCluskey, singer of Liverpool-based synthpop band Orchestral Manoeuvres in the Dark. McCluskey diagnosed New Pop as a mass retreat from the sheer visionary intensity represented by Ian Curtis. “I think Joy Division were the very last band who could come along and *look* for something.” But those who didn't buy the New Pop dream still pined for a band that represented some sort of vision quest, a band worth being devout about.

U2 stepped forward to fill that role. Their first really successful single, “I Will Follow,” made it clear that they were in the market for converts. Prior to that, they'd recorded their debut single, “11 O'Clock Tick Tock,” with Martin Hannett, and done another single, “A Day Without Me,” that was actually inspired by Ian Curtis. On that track, Bono sang as the departed Curtis looking back on “a world I left behind.” It was almost as if Bono was consciously preparing to take on

the role vacated by Curtis. According to Tony Wilson, that was pretty much the case. “Two months after Ian died, U2 were brought round to my office at Granada TV by this plugger looking to break them, and I remember Bono sitting on my desk saying how incredibly sorry he was about Ian’s death, how it had really hurt him...how Ian was the number one singer of his generation, and he, Bono, knew he was always only ever going to be number two!” laughs Wilson. “And he said something else. Something like, ‘Now he’s gone, I promise you I’ll do it for him.’ Not quite that silly, but along those lines!”

In 1983, the glory boys broke through, with all those not seduced by Goth’s vampy ways rallying to the new transcendence, aka the Big Music. In February, both the Bunnymen and U2 enjoyed their first U.K. Top 10 hits, with “The Cutter” and “New Year’s Day,” respectively. After briefly intersecting with New Pop, Simple Minds reverted to their true calling, stadium-ready art rock, and produced an increasingly bombastic series of hits, on which Jim Kerr’s panoramic lyrics, teeming with lofty intangibles, invoked wanderlust and wonder.

Elemental imagery was all over British music in 1983–84, from the Waterboys’ songs such as “The Big Music,” “A Pagan Place,” and “The Whole of the Moon,” to Big Country’s hits “Fields of Fire (400 Miles)” and “In a Big Country.” It wasn’t just a mainstream phenomenon, either. Formed by ex-Fall members Martin Bramah and Una Baines, the Blue Orchids topped the indie charts with *The Greatest Hit (Money Mountain)*, a magnificent album of acid-soaked neopsychodelia teeming with pagan and pantheistic poetry. Their anthem “Dumb Magician” ended with the defiant call to transcendence—“The only way out is up”—while “Mad as the Mist and Snow” used verses by W. B. Yeats as its lyric. The Blue Orchids had supported Echo and the Bunnymen on the latter’s 1981 U.K. tour, and in some ways the two groups were underground and mainstream versions of the same quest for “a glory beyond all glories,” as Bill Drummond put it. You could see the affinity in the groups’ record covers: *The Greatest Hit* showed the setting sun glinting over a silhouetted mountainscape, while *Heaven Up Here* gorgeously pictured the four Bunnymen staring into a navy blue sea while standing on an ebb tide beach whose wet sand reflects the dark turquoise sky.

Along with lyrical and pictorial imagery of natural grandeur, the Big Music groups shared a Celtic connection. They were all from Scotland, or Ireland, or the heavily Irish Liverpool and Manchester. They also often gave the quest for “indefinable glory” a vaguely military or messianic aura. The Bunnymen tapped into this spirit with their 1980 shows, using camouflage, dry ice, and inventive lighting to create an *Apocalypse Now* atmosphere. U2 turned pacifism itself into a crusade on their third album, *War*. On the ensuing tour, Bono

marched about onstage clasping a white flag.

Unlike Echo and the Bunnymen, who kept the nature of their mission deliberately nebulous, U2's fervor had an unmistakable moral charge. This was the *real* positive punk, an attempt to finally do something constructive with rock's energies. In one early interview, Bono rejected the Sex Pistols' form of insurrection as "just a con.... Can't you see we're really rebelling against the idea of rebelling?" Three of U2's lineup—Bono, the Edge, and drummer Larry Mullen—were converts to a nonsectarian Christian group called Shalom. "I loved the idea of being reborn," Bono told *Mother Jones* in 1989. "I think people should be reborn every day, man!" At twenty years old, the idea of "surrender every day" and self-sacrifice for a cause thrilled Bono and his brethren to the core.

Belief infused every particle of U2's early sound, from the cold incandescence of the Edge's guitar to what the critic Richard Cook described as "the beckoning ecstasy" of Bono's voice. "It would be wrong for me to say, yes, we can change the world with a song," Bono told *Trouser Press*. "But every time I try writing, that's where I'm at!" The band's role models were Bob Marley, who fused religious faith and political ire, and the Clash, though U2 chose more universal, liberal-humanist touchstones than the latter—Martin Luther King and Poland's Solidarity movement rather than the Red Brigade and the Sandinista.

What saved U2 from sanctimony was the sheer exhilaration of their post-Television rock. "I Will Follow" could be a Dublin cousin to PiL's "Public Image." The Edge's radiant chords and Bono's ardent vocals create the classic U2 sensation, a chesty surge that elevates the spirit by neglecting the body. Nothing in the music appealed to the hips. The music was stirring, but sexless and resolutely undanceable. Crucial to this feeling of martial urgency was the unsyncopated drumming of Larry Mullen, who had learned to play in his school's all-boy marching band.

"Boy" is the key word when it comes to understanding U2, from the soldier boy rhythms to Bono's choirboy vocals, to the beautiful blond six-year-old on the back cover of their debut album, *Boy*. Inside were songs such as "Stories for Boys" and "Into the Heart," in which Bono sang about retreating "into the heart of a child," finding the naïve purity of spirit lost with adulthood. Around this time, Bono talked about wanting their live audience to feel spiritually cleansed and reborn.

Everything about U2 was large-scale: their lyrical themes, Bono's voice, the size of their sound, their sense of purpose, and their ambition (U2 always obviously wanted to be the biggest band in the world). "If we stay in small clubs, we'll develop small minds, and then

we'll start making small music," Bono told *Trouser Press*. War propelled U2 into the big leagues in 1983, topping the album charts in the U.K. and reaching number twelve in America. The U.S. tour that followed was documented on the live album *Under a Blood Red Sky*, a concert at Colorado's Red Rocks open-air amphitheater that was broadcast on MTV and generated a shorter clip of the band playing "Sunday Bloody Sunday." When this promo went into heavy rotation on MTV, U2 reached the threshold of megastardom. In 1984, "Pride (In the Name of Love)" smashed down the door.

The accompanying album, *The Unforgettable Fire*, was surprisingly understated, however, largely shunning anthems for atmospherics. Coproducer Brian Eno encouraged the band to create sonic landscapes that turned ears into eyes, gazing into the far distance, literally *visionary* music. The Edge also made a conscious decision to sidestep his burgeoning guitar hero status and poured his creative energy into keyboards and "general atmospheric work." This was actually the logical destination for his guitar playing, which always had a curiously disembodied, synthlike quality, composed of swirling texture strands rather than riffs or power chords. Avoiding solos and shunning the grittiness of distortion, the Edge instead used effects and techniques such as echo, slide, harmonics, and extremely prolonged sustain, all of which blurred the link between the physicality of his playing and the amorphous sounds that came out of the speakers. On *The Unforgettable Fire*, he emerged as guitarist-as-cinematographer par excellence. The title track resembles a first-class sunset or the Milky Way on the clearest of nights.

Echo and the Bunnymen, meanwhile, deftly maintained a balance between using big gestures and retaining a humorous detachment. McCulloch used words such as "heaven" as vague signifiers for some kind of beyond or unimaginable perfection, but kept the spirituality undefined and deflated any pomposity with wisecracks. "There was a crossover between the audiences for Echo and U2," McCulloch recalled in 1989. "But I think U2's audience liked the rally call, and our following liked the sarcasm."

Following the Bunnymen's torturously transitional third album, *Porcupine*, 1984's *Ocean Rain* was lush, orchestrated, and with the orgasmic moans of "Thorn of Crowns," overtly erotic for the first time. The Bunnymen's music had always been gloriously gray, but now on *Ocean Rain* it went Technicolor and swoony with string-laden songs such as "The Killing Moon." Deliberately distancing the Bunnymen from the other Big Music bands of the day, *Ocean Rain* veered away from rock toward pop. "Kissing music" is how McCulloch described the record, a phrase that drew attention to the Bunnymen's number one teenybop selling point: the singer's magnificent lips. The strategy

worked. By a strange twist, Echo and the Bunnymen, the group who'd helped bring rock back during the era of New Pop, became proper pop stars. "Missing the point of our mission/Will we become misshapen?" McCulloch had sung on the confused and overripe *Porcupine*. But unlike U2, Echo and the Bunnymen, for all their camouflage gear and abstract urgency, ultimately didn't really *have* a mission beyond banishing the soul shadows and celebrating the wild wonder of being.

ZTT, THE ART OF NOISE, AND FRANKIE GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

IN THE TWILIGHT PHASE of his tenure as Bow Wow Wow's manager, Malcolm McLaren had come to New York in August 1981 for the launch of the group's debut tour of America. During his stay, he was taken on a kind of ethnomusicological field trip to the South Bronx, his guide being Gray's Michael Holman, an early downtown ambassador for graffiti and hip-hop. McLaren witnessed breakdancing, scratching, and rapping *in situ* and came away convinced that hip-hop was black punk. The way DJs used old records to make new music was just the sort of cultural piracy to warm the cockles of his *bricoleur's* heart.

In 1982, as New Pop reached its peak of U.K. chart dominance, McLaren also became convinced that a massive rediscovery of the earthy and ethnic was all set to be music's next big thing, that anything "raw"—South African township pop, Appalachian hillbilly music, Dominican merengue, Cajun music, Cuban rhythms—would be embraced as a backlash against "cooked" pop. Hip-hop, too, he saw as a kind of urban folk music. The Bow Wow Wow debacle also convinced McLaren that he had to front his next project and become a star in his own right. But he still needed a producer who could turn his latest ragbag of subversive concepts—hip-hop's scratching 'n' rapping meets folk rhythms from around the world—into coherent music.

Ironically, McLaren turned to a man synonymous with the super-glossy pop he wished to extirpate, Trevor Horn. After the monstrous success of ABC's *The Lexicon of Love*, everybody was clamoring for Horn's Midas touch. Most prominent among the would-be beneficiaries was Spandau Ballet, the former New Romantic band that had faltered when they switched from synthpop to white funk. Spandau craved the deluxe *Lexicon* sound, and the conservative side of Horn saw the logic of repeating a winning formula. But McLaren appealed to his sense of adventure. "I fancied Malcolm, he seemed like a hoot," Horn recalls. It was a turning point for his career and for British pop.

The ex-Svengali and the superproducer could not have been a more chalk-and-cheese pair. McLaren saw Horn as a key architect of the sexless and edgeless New Pop he despised, while Horn had always thought the Sex Pistols to be fraudulent, his producer's ear enabling him to tell that *Never Mind the Bollocks* was a skillfully concocted studio creation. Despite their differences, the pair got on. "It's impossible not to be charmed by Malcolm," says Horn. McLaren, meanwhile, became taken with the idea of expanding Horn's horizons

by dragging him across the planet for the project, whose working title was *Folk Dances of the World*.

Budget limitations meant that McLaren's planned around-the-world-of-music trek got reduced to a stint in South Africa and a longer sojourn in cosmopolitan New York, whose vast range of ethnic musics meant that it was easy to simulate the panglobal vibe. In the South African township of Soweto, McLaren found musicians on the streets, and Horn recorded them playing popular and traditional tunes, some of which McLaren later registered as his own compositions. One of these reworked Afropop tunes became the basis for "Double Dutch," a huge U.K. hit in the summer of 1983.

McLaren was already a chart veteran by then, though, having scored a U.K. Top 10 single in the winter of 1982 with "Buffalo Gals," a bizarre fusion of hip-hop and Appalachian square dancing, which sold half a million copies despite McLaren's tone-deaf and rhythmically challenged vocals. In the larcenous spirit of hip-hop, "Buffalo Gals" nicked its main melody and title from a traditional square dance. McLaren recited lines such as "Four buffalo gals go 'round the outside/And do-si-doh with your pardners" in a shaky amalgam of hillbilly dance master and hip-hop MC. DJ/rapper crew the World's Famous Supreme Team contributed scratching (the first appearance of this technique in the pop mainstream) and cryptic sound bites such as "she's looking like a hobo" juttled out of the mix. In U.K. dance culture, "Buffalo Gals" is regarded as an old-school hip-hop anthem, its collage of beats, bass, and samples making it a foundational track for genres such as jungle and trip-hop.

To weld together this delightfully daft composite, Horn used a crack team of musicians and technicians, comprised of engineer Gary Langan, arranger/keyboardist Anne Dudley (both of whom had worked on *Lexicon of Love*), and programmer/computer whiz J. J. Jeczalik. A nonmusician, McLaren generated a surfeit of inspired ideas, but little actual musical material. For "Buffalo Gals" and the accompanying album (now called *Duck Rock*), Horn's team had to piece everything together and fill in the considerable gaps. "Anne was the music department, J. J. was the rhythm department," says Horn. During these volatile McLaren sessions, a creative esprit de corps coalesced among Langan, Jeczalik, and Dudley. This became the kernel of the Art of Noise, Horn's next and most audacious production project. "*Duck Rock* proved you could make a record out of very disparate material," says Dudley, whose crucial role earned her one-third of the songwriting credit. "In that sense it was a prototype Art of Noise album."

McLaren was so creatively scatty that even before *Duck Rock* was completed, his mind was on his next nutty notion, an album

combining pop and opera. He would score another hit with the Puccini rip-off "Madame Butterfly," but by then Horn had moved on. Working with McLaren had been chaotic, but the whole experience left Horn with a massively enlarged sense of possibilities. "I got more from that one album with Malcolm than from working with any other artist," he admits. McLaren's love of concepts and provocations rubbed off. It was going to be hard for Horn to go back to glitzing up dull pop groups.

One thing that superproducers can do instead of turning sow's ears into silk purses is start their own labels, where they have much more control, and can also earn a lot more money. Horn's wife/manager, Jill Sinclair, had the business skills and ruthless streak to make this idea work. Horn had the spectacular sound. But he really wanted the label to have a strong identity, and knew that wasn't his forte. The Buggles, the group he'd fronted, had an international hit with "Video Killed the Radio Star," but became one-hit wonders largely because of their lack of image. What Horn needed was a McLaren-like figure, a magus of rhetoric and presentation who knew how to work the media. One person came to mind: Paul Morley, *NME*'s hotheaded prophet of New Pop.

"I'd spent a whole year wanting to *belt* Paul," Horn laughs. Morley had interviewed the Buggles and headlined the feature DIRTY OLD MEN WITH MODERN MANNERISMS, meaning that they were just prog-rock session hacks disguising themselves as New Wave. "He wasn't wrong in a way," concedes Horn. "It was one of the Buggles' failings that we didn't have a manifesto. When I was working with ABC, I watched Martin Fry and saw how well he had the music paper thing worked out." Morley and Horn both had cameo roles in "The Look of Love" video and, on the set, Morley tried to kiss Horn. "I was taken by surprise and pushed him away!" Then Morley profiled Horn for *NME*, hailing him as the hippest producer of 1982. "In the interview, he took all the things I said and presented my ideas so much better than I did," recalls Horn. "I was impressed."

Morley, meanwhile, found himself in a similar quandary to Horn at the end of '82. After six years of crusading for postpunk and New Pop, he felt exhausted with music journalism and quit his job as a staff writer at *NME*. In the age of glitzy, full-color magazines like *Smash Hits* and the *Face*, the monochrome music papers were no longer at the center of pop culture. The blander Wham!-Duran types were ousting the brighter minds that Morley had championed and it felt like the music business, for so long thrown off balance by punk, was now back in control. "By 1983, both Trevor and me were questioning the value of what we did, from our different positions," recalls Morley. "I was going through a period of guilt, feeling that all I did was comment and

carp from the sidelines. As a critic I'd *tried* to make things happen, but ultimately I felt parasitical. I had this romantic idealism that I should contribute." Then Horn called Morley up and said, "Let's have an adventure."

Creating an identity for Horn's label—christened Zang Tuum Tumb—came naturally for Morley. He'd always celebrated those independent labels who managed to shed the dowdy-shopkeeper aura that often clung to all things "indie" and instead cultivated a mystique through seductive packaging and witty allusions. Fast Product was a favorite for its design sense, as was Factory for its gorgeous, enigmatic artwork and dadaist japes, such as giving catalog numbers to things that weren't records. "Even moods and sneezes got cataloged," claims Morley. "And a cat." Morley was also influenced by arty European labels such as Sordide Sentimentale and Les Disques Du Crepuscule, the latter run by a clutch of Factory-worshipping Belgian aesthetes who released esoteric compilations such as *The Fruit of the Original Sin*. Other Morley faves included Fetish, which had groups such as 23 Skidoo and covers designed by ultrahip graphic artist Neville Brody, and ZE.

Although often described as ZTT's marketing director, Morley never had an official title. "I worked like a fucking demon, to be honest. I did about five jobs—A&R, helping design sleeves, commissioning, writing all the label copy, the sleeve notes." Playful, pretentious (in the best sense), and liberally peppered with quotations from philosophers and novelists, Morley's notes became ZTT's hallmark, captivating some with their wit and intellectual panache, while irritating others immensely. Although Horn himself didn't always understand what Morley was on about in the sleeve notes, he says, "I loved the idea of a manifesto, because musicians are rarely any good at romanticizing themselves. Unfortunately, those sleeve notes caused Paul to fall out majorly with most ZTT artists quite quickly."

ZTT's output was divided into two streams, the Action Series and the Incidental Series. The latter consisted of experimental and contemplative music. In a piece for *NME* grandiosely titled "Who Bridges the Gap between the Record Executive and the Genius? Me," Morley argued that a new "blockbuster" mentality had taken over the industry and it was rendering extinct cult figures such as John Martyn, the kind of "midlist" artists once allowed to make record after record with only middling sales. The Action Series, meanwhile, was designed to compete in precisely this brutal new chart pop *realpolitik* oriented around singles and videos. The word "Action" signaled ZTT's aggressive intent. "I was sick of the people that were getting all the attention, such as Gary Kemp and Simon Le Bon, so I wanted to

muscle in, push these offensive characters aside,” Morley told *Melody Maker*. “We hate videos and all that rubbish, but unfortunately we’re stuck with it now,” he told another interviewer. “So our philosophy is to get in there and do it better, to do it *richer*.” If Horn’s job involved ensuring ZTT records *sounded* sensational, Morley’s was to engineer *sensations* that convulsed their way through the media. Like McLaren before him, Morley wanted to use hype, scandal, and staged confrontation to conjure instant pop myth.

Zang Tuum Tumb was a phrase Morley found in Luigi Russolo’s 1913 manifesto for a futurist music, “the Art of Noises.” In it, Russolo quoted from a letter by the movement’s leader, F. T. Marinetti, who used onomatopoeia to poetically describe a battle during the Balkan Wars. “*Zang-Tumb-Tuumb*,” as Marinetti rendered it, evoked the sound of Bulgarian siege cannons bombarding the Ottoman Turks. The military connotations of Zang Tuum Tumb appealed to Morley’s sense of the label as declaring war on a New Pop gone wrong. In this martial spirit, the first Zang Tuum Tumb release was *Into Battle with the Art of Noise*.

Although the McLaren album laid the groundwork for the group, the actual trigger for the Art of Noise came from something far less cool: Horn and his crew’s nine months of laborious production work on Yes’s *90125*. During one of the many recording session hiatuses, Jeczalik and Langan got bored and started messing around on a Fairlight CMI Series II sampler, the first keyboard-based digital sampler. They took Alan White’s drum track from an aborted Yes song as raw material, but instead of the usual practice of sampling individual drum hits they shoved a whole drum break into the Fairlight. When Horn heard the crashing monsterfunk stampede of looped rhythm, he realized that Langan and Jeczalik had unwittingly reinvented hip-hop’s wheel. When it came to making rap records, hip-hop producers in those days used drum machines or live musicians, simply because the Fairlight sampler was priced out of their league. Beating the likes of Marley Marl to the punch by a couple of years, the Art of Noise pioneered one of the foundations of hip-hop: the sampled and looped break beat.

Sampling was at the core of the Art of Noise. In the early eighties the only people who could afford Fairlights were art rock superstars such as Yes, Peter Gabriel, and Kate Bush. But being a wealthy superproducer and a fiend for state-of-art machinery, Horn owned a Fairlight. In Jeczalik, he also had a burgeoning sampler virtuoso, which was fortunate, because in addition to its prohibitive cost, the Fairlight was “very difficult to operate,” says Anne Dudley. “It also sounded dreadful,” she says, at least by today’s standards. The Fairlight reproduced sampled sounds at low resolution and could only

capture 1.2-second sound bites. Yet restriction proved to be the mother of invention. “We had to be incredibly ingenious to make this thing work,” says Dudley. “I had to think of ways of using short sounds all the time. That’s why Art of Noise’s music is so stabby.” You can hear this on “Beat Box,” the track built around the Yes drum loop, and throughout the *Into Battle* EP. Everything is staccato and punchy. Clipped orchestral fanfares jab and joust. Sampled vocals, stretched across the octaves of the Fairlight keyboard, are played in stuttering patterns. A baritone belch becomes a strange oompahlike bass pulse. Bright bursts of unidentifiable sound ambush your ears. It’s like being in an audio cartoon version of Marinetti’s Balkan battlefield.

The Fairlight’s grainy, low-resolution samples have a particular character and charm, a “veiled, indistinct quality,” as critic Timothy Warner puts it. On the Art of Noise records, the samples often have a faded, Pathé newsreel aura. *Into Battle* sounds a bit like hip-hop might have had it been invented in Europe in 1916. Morley envisioned the whole ZTT aesthetic as a flashback to the 1910s and 1920s, futurism and surrealism and all the other great manifesto-mongering isms of that era. His slogan for ZTT was “Raiding the twentieth century.” As Greil Marcus would later do in *Lipstick Traces*, Morley traced punk back through situationism to what he calls “the great sense of play and provocation” animating Dada. Art of Noise’s absurdist collage of beats and pieces, its “flung together” messthetic of “inconsistencies, hyperbole, non sequitur, and conflicting themes,” as Dudley put it, was actually much closer to Dada than the carnage-crazy Italian futurists. At the same time, it anticipated the fin de siècle sounds of sampladelic genres such as hardcore rave and Big Beat. By the nineties, what had made the Art of Noise eccentric—instrumental dance music that relegated vocals to being just another texture, while turning drum sounds and effects into hooks—was totally normal.

If Dudley, Langan, and Jeczalik were the musical core of the Art of Noise, and Horn was its musical director, Morley’s role was the organizer of meaning and maker of mischief. “I acted as if I was in the group,” says Morley. “There was a lot of high-tech jamming, so it was quite formless, and I helped Trevor edit it together. But even if I’d only thought of the name the Art of Noise, I think that was enough. I did take credit because I named all the songs.” As Dudley puts it, *Into Battle*’s standout track “Moments in Love” “is not ‘Moments in Love’ without the title. That’s incredibly important, almost worth half the publishing credit!” Indeed, it’s hard to imagine this gliding moonwalk of glistening idyllictronica being called anything else, so exquisitely does it capture the “wide asleep” feeling of falling head over heels.

Fundamental to the Art of Noise concept was anonymity. At their first group meeting in February 1983, they all agreed that no photos

of the group would appear on the records or in interviews, they'd never appear in the videos, and there'd be no lead singer. This was partly a pragmatic decision, given that none of the group were exactly pop star material. Morley turned this facelessness into a provocation. "All the Art of Noise is, is taking the piss a little out of pop groups, which is why the first photos we sent out were of spanners [wrenches] and roses," he told *NME*. As he later pointed out during a ZTT showcase at London's Ambassador's Theatre, "a spanner is intrinsically more interesting than the lead singer of Tears for Fears." The side effect of this anonymity, though, was that Morley became the Art of Noise's spokesperson in interviews.

Much later, when it all went sour, Jeczalik would quantify Horn and Morley's combined musical contribution as slightly less than 2 percent. But Dudley is much more generous. "Paul, to his credit, was the entire creator of all the titles, the artwork, the manifestos. He gave us an identity. None of us had really intended to be a band, but Paul got very excited by it and swept us along with his enthusiasm. Without him, we wouldn't have existed. We would've been a bunch of session musicians. He gave us the name and we thought we ought to live up to it because it was so good."

The Art of Noise, and ZTT in general, represented Morley's fantasy of an alternate pop history. What if European culture just carried on from where it was just before the Second World War, unaffected by the arrival of rock 'n' roll, and instead generated its own totally un-American version of pop music? The third ZTT release, *Propaganda Present the Nine Lives of Dr. Mabuse* by the Düsseldorf group Propaganda, represented the next stage in this master plan of raiding the (early, European) twentieth century. "The children of Fritz Lang and Giorgio Moroder" is how *NME*'s Chris Bohn tagged Propaganda. Inspired by Lang's expressionist trilogy of movies about a shadowy master criminal, "Dr. Mabuse" was epic Eurodisco, for which Horn and engineer Steve Lipson constructed a monumental edifice of arching synths and percussion as imposing as marble colonnades. Propaganda's conceptualist, Ralf Dorper, justified this "very bombastic sound" to *ZigZag*. "The character Mabuse was symbolizing something extraordinary, something more or less unreal, so we had to have an unreal production." Formerly in metal-bashing pioneers Die Krupps, Dorper was a fanatic cinephile who preferred movies to music. "Cinema is much more inspirational to me," he declared. "It's much more multi-leveled: you have a storyline, a setting, a soundtrack."

Propaganda's ambition was as grand as their sound. They wanted to be the biggest German band in the world. Released in February 1984, "Dr. Mabuse" peaked at number twenty-seven on the U.K. charts. That would normally have been a decent result for a new band

and a young label, but “Mabuse” had already been horribly eclipsed by the gargantuan impact of ZTT’s second release, “Relax” by Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

HORN FIRST SAW Frankie Goes to Hollywood on a British new music TV show called *The Tube*. The Liverpool group had been given a small budget to do a slightly cleaned-up remake of their own ultra-sleazy promo video, which the band had filmed in the hopes of getting a record deal. The look was striking. Singer Holly Johnson and backing vocalist Paul Rutherford pranced in leather fetish wear. The sound, scrappy funk rock, had a crude but lusty energy. “More a jingle than a song,” is how Horn describes the original “Relax,” but then the producer actually preferred half-written tunes to professionally finished songs, because there was potential for him to “fix them up,” inflate them in his inimitable style. Morley, initially more doubtful, liked Frankie’s hard-core gay element. “I kinda thought it could be the fun I wanted to have, to invent a pop group.” Not that he had a blank canvas. The kinky S&M image predated Frankie’s falling into ZTT’s clutches. So did the basic disco-metal sound and the group’s balls-out attitude, as distilled in the Liverpoolian expression “Give it *loads!*” which became Frankie’s catchphrase and rallying cry.

What Frankie really brought to the table was a characteristically Liverpoolian commitment to being entertaining. Like Ian McCulloch, Johnson and Rutherford had that innate belief that they were *already* stars, only the wider world had yet to catch on. The pair were veterans of the glam-turned-punk milieu centered in Liverpool’s nightclub Eric’s. Rutherford had formed Liverpool’s one proper London-style punk band, the Spitfire Boys, whose claims to fame were that they were all gay, lived together in one room, read Genet, and never rehearsed. “One week if you wore makeup you were a queer, the next you were a punk,” Rutherford recalled. It didn’t make much difference either way, you still got beaten up. Bowie-boy Holly Johnson fearlessly affronted the straights with his extremist hairstyles, alternately dying his social-security number into the side of his head, getting a mini-Mohawk, and shaving his scalp and painting it red and green. “Decadence was the key word then,” he recalled.

Johnson joined Big in Japan, Liverpool’s glam-punk supergroup, whose members all went on to pop success of one sort or another. Fame eluded Johnson until, after various failed ventures, he finally hooked up with Rutherford and the three hetero members of Frankie—Peter “Ped” Gill, Mark O’Toole, and Brian “Nasher” Nash, collectively known forevermore as “the Lads.” The name Frankie Goes

to Hollywood came from a picture stuck to the wall of the band's dank rehearsal cellar. Taken from an old glamour magazine, it showed a young Frank Sinatra getting off an airplane in Los Angeles and being greeted by screaming teenyboppers. It symbolized Frankie's determination to be stars at all costs.

Unfortunately, Frankie's lust for fame was so fierce that they signed the lousy contract dangled by ZTT (a £250 advance for each of the first two singles, with a meager royalty rate of 5 percent). They also buckled when Jill Sinclair made the deal conditional on Frankie's signing their song publishing rights over to ZTT's sister company, Perfect Songs, for a miserly advance of £5,000. "That's the embarrassment I have really," admits Morley, comparing the contract to a "1950s deal," with the recording, publishing, and studio (Frankie's records would be made at Horn's SARM studios, ensuring an extra stream of profit for what Morley calls "the family") all "locked in with the same company. You can mount a case, but it was an unfair monopoly." In the long run, this greed would come back to bite ZTT.

Once Frankie were securely indentured, Morley went into overdrive, mapping out the Frankie marketing campaign as a military assault on pop. There would be a perfect conceptual sequence of singles tackling the biggest possible themes ("sex, war, religion"), while the videos and packaging would maximize the shock impact of Holly and Paul's hard-core homosexuality. Explicit gayness was one of pop's few remaining taboos. Boy George opened the closet door, but only the tiniest crack. Ultimately he was too cuddly, coyly masking his sexuality with statements such as the famous declaration that he'd rather have a cup of tea than sex. Pop was long overdue for something that was fully "out," that carried the scent of semen and the acrid, dizzy-making tang of amyl nitrite. Frankie led the way, closely followed by fellow Liverpoolian Pete Burns of Dead or Alive and by Bronski Beat. The latter, whom rumor had it turned down ZTT's advances, represented the responsible side of gay pride, the struggle for dignity in the face of bigotry. Frankie, by contrast, were rampantly pleasure principled, and thus far more threatening. Bronski's singer, Jimmy Somerville, dapper but basically ordinary looking in his jeans and Ben Sherman shirt, communicated the idea that "we're just like everybody else, except in bed." Johnson, and especially Rutherford with his clone mustache, transmitted something more confrontational. As Johnson put it, "There's no pussy-footing with us. We are into *pleasure* and we think that what has been regarded as a sexual perversion should be brought into the open."

Imagine if someone had wanted to re-create punk but had only a single surviving relic to work from: the infamous T-shirt worn by Sid

Vicious of two cruising cowboys in leather chaps and little else, their giant cocks hanging down and almost touching. “Morley had his strategy all worked out, he wanted it to be like the Sex Pistols—all the outrage, controversy—but this time with all the sex,” Rutherford recalled. Crucially, though, Frankie were the *disco Pistols*, what punk would have sounded like if modeled on Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love” rather than the Stooges’ “No Fun.”

Yet the conditions under which Frankie’s records were made couldn’t have been further from punk’s spirit. Far from “doing it yourself,” the band ended up excluded from the recording process by their producer. “Relax” displayed Horn’s maniacal perfectionism and his willingness to disregard the musicians he was supposedly working with and for. He quickly came to see Frankie as an obstacle to his vision. In the studio, overawed and intimidated by Horn’s reputation, the band was too nervous to make suggestions. In his autobiography, *A Bone in My Flute*, Johnson admitted, “Whatever he said we went along with. On one occasion, Trevor said to me that he had considered sacking the musicians from the band, leaving just Paul and me to front the act.” After an abortive attempt to get the Lads to play to his satisfaction, Horn hired the Blockheads, the accomplished funkateers who’d once backed Ian Dury, but the results weren’t modern sounding enough. Eventually, a high-tech version of “Relax” was constructed with the rhythm programming assistance of Art of Noise’s Jeczalik and keyboard work from session player Andy Richards. Apart from Johnson, the band twiddled their thumbs in Liverpool while the definitive version of “Relax” was made at Horn’s West London studio. “I was just...Look, ‘Relax’ *had* to be a hit,” says Horn with a mixture of self-justification and guilt. In the end, the sole sonic contributions from the band, besides Johnson’s vocals, were samples of the group jumping in a swimming pool. Yet Horn later admitted, “I could never have done these records in isolation. There was no actual playing by the band, but the whole *feeling* came from the band.”

“Relax” sounded colossal, as well it should have after Horn had lavished £70,000 in studio time on it. But Horn claims that its monumental quality owed less to his production tricks than the key it was played in and the instrumentation used. “‘Relax’ is perfect because it’s in E,” he says. “The most satisfying note on the bass guitar is bottom E and that’s what’s running through the whole song.” Technology did play its part, though. A new device enabled Horn to lock the Fairlight-sampled bass pulse in superhumanly tight synchrony with the four-on-the-floor Linn drum machine. The pumping bass and pounding kick drum fuse in a love action of thrust and grind. In his memoir, Johnson describes how “Relax” merged “rock edge” with the Hi-NRG disco that ruled gay clubs in the early eighties. DJ/producer

Ian Levine, the pioneer of this sound, defined Hi-NRG as “melodic, straightforward dance music that’s not too funky.” The nonfunkiness was crucial. Slamming rather than swinging, Hi-NRG’s white European feel was accentuated by butt-bumping bass twangs at the end of each bar.

“Relax” tapped into Hi-NRG’s remorseless metronomic precision and orgiastic vibe. “As we were making ‘Relax,’ I became more and more convinced it was all about sex,” recalls Horn. “It was like a shagging beat. Also the more I met the guys, I thought it was about sex. They were *obsessed* with it. By the end we were thinking of giant orgasms.” Horn filled the record with “imaginary mayhem,” synth whooshes, gasps and exhalations. The whole song is suffused with a preorgasmic glow. Two-thirds of the way through, “Relax” ignores its own advice—“Relax, don’t do it/When you want to come”—and erupts with a crass but hilariously liquid simulated ejaculation. The spasming drumroll at the end of the single feels like an amyl rush. The protracted and abstract “Sex Mix” was even more blatant with its rubbery squelches, bathhouse splashes, boystown gang chants, slurping sounds, and Holly leerily slurring stray words such as “awesome” and “feel.” Ironically, the song’s original concept was “If you wanna get on top of a situation, you’ve gotta work hard to do it,” Johnson told the *East Village Eye*. “The sexual innuendo was put upon it later.”

Despite all the “sex,” “Relax” was sexy only in the exhibitionist sense of the Amsterdam leather bars Johnson visited, where the sex acts had an element of “theatre and performance” he enjoyed. “Relax” was driven by something far stronger than sensuality: the idea of sex as weapon, shock tactic, threat. “Relax” didn’t offer flesh or delight, it reveled in the word, in saying the unsayable. The specific word in question was “come.” If “Relax” was “about” anything, it appeared to be delaying orgasm, or oral sex, or both. Strangely, the moral guardians at the BBC nearly failed to notice the song’s suggestiveness. Radio One supported “Relax” heavily in the weeks following its October 1983 release. It slowly inched its way up the charts until the group was invited to appear on *Top of the Pops* in January 1984, whereupon “Relax” vaulted up to number six. Absurdly, it was only after having made it a hit that Radio One decreed the single unfit for broadcast after a DJ noticed its obscene overtones and refused to play it on his show. Within two weeks of the ban, “Relax” reached number one, where it stayed for five weeks, its long reign at the top only bolstered when *Top of the Pops* and BBC Television also banned it.

The only surprising thing about the ban was how long it took to, ah, come. Morley had courted scandal from the start. ZTT’s ad campaign for “Relax” began with two quarter-page ads in the music

press. The first featured a mustachioed and grinning Rutherford in a sailor hat, shades, and leather tunic. The second presented Johnson as a sinister, unsmiling sex dwarf, with a shaven head and rubber gloves. "ALL THE NICE BOYS LOVE SEA MEN," declared the first ad, "Soap it up...rub it up...Frankie Goes to Hollywood are coming...making Duran Duran lick the shit off their shoes...Nineteen inches that must be taken always." The second ad promised "theories of bliss, a history of Liverpool from 1963 to 1983, a guide to Amsterdam bars," and a vision that would "grip especially those who are at home in the giant cities and in the web of their numberless interconnecting relationships." The single's artwork laid it on thicker still. A photo on the back cover showed a hand tugging cruelly on the ring piercing a male nipple. Elsewhere there was a cute little logo of four wriggly-tailed spermatozoa. Divided into "chapters," the sleeve notes kicked off with the invitation, "Let's go down the hall to the disciplining room" and included a scene in which the "monster" Frankie orders his sexual vassal Peta to "get down there and lick that shit off my shoes!" Says Morley, "I rang up Holly and said, 'Look I'm going to put an abbreviated pornographic novel on the back of the twelve-inch, is that okay?' And Holly went, 'Yeah, all right.'"

Along with the avant-porn pantheon (de Sade, Genet, Bataille, Burroughs), Morley doubtless got some inspiration from *Taxi Zum Klo* (Taxi to the Toilet), Frank Ripploh's recent movie about German gay life, which featured unprecedentedly graphic scenes of cottaging and water sports. D.A.F., the leather-clad Düsseldorf duo, were also Morley favorites. In *NME* he'd praised their *Alles Ist Gut* as "slimy, steamy sex music," a hard electrodisco evocation of "the rubbing, juices, pounding, striving, belching, stickiness...the smells, the rhythms, the passions, the secretions, the darkness, the tears of S.E.X.," and framed the review with quotes from D. H. Lawrence and radical antipsychiatrist David Cooper. The whole Frankie escapade gave off a powerful whiff of sixties-style sex radicalism (Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown et al.). One could see Frankie as a last spurt of that style of libertinism that saw the libido as inherently revolutionary, before a revitalized Thanatos (in the form of AIDS) imposed limits on Eros.

Simply through demanding "satisfaction" (orgasm), all sixties pop music had a powerful insurrectionary charge. But during the permissive seventies, heterosex gradually lost its edge. The only frissons came from the glam star's flirtations with decadence and gender-bending. Pop's forays into homosexuality had been tentative and teasing so far. Frankie were a full-on glimpse of a world where anything was permitted in the quest for kicks and cocks. While you didn't actually see fisting or S&M, the video for "Relax" was orgiastic.

Directed by Bernard Rose, it depicts Holly Johnson as a naïf in the big city who stumbles into a gay pleasure dome. There, a Nero-like fatso presides over scenes of Roman-style decadence. With Rutherford as his guide, Holly's innocence gets debauched and he's last seen in the sticky midst of a frothing gang grope.

INTO BATTLE WITH THE ART OF NOISE had minimal impact in Britain, but in America "Beat Box" became a popular track with breakdancers. Because most Americans knew nothing of ZTT's reputation, the Art of Noise were often assumed to be a black group (indeed their music would eventually become one of the most popular sources for sampling, alongside Kraftwerk, James Brown, and Parliament-Funkadelic). Inspired by this B-boy reception, which proved that their cut-up aesthetic could cut it on the dance floor, the Art of Noise reworked the track as the single "Beat Box (Diversions One)" b/w "Beat Box (Diversions Two)." The remakes featured a rambling rock 'n' roll bassline and dashing tremolo guitar licks redolent of Duane Eddy, as if to place the Art of Noise in that noble if marginal tradition of instrumental pop hit makers such as the Ventures.

With that tune, the Art of Noise now joined the pantheon. First, they reached number one on the *Billboard* dance chart (even as "Relax" reigned over the U.K. pop chart). Then "Beat Box" spawned yet another dance floor smash with the closely related single "Close (To the Edit)." "It's not called 'Close (To the Edit)' for nothing, because you could more or less stitch any bit of 'Close' into 'Beat Box' and it would still sound like one piece," laughs Anne Dudley. "I can't actually remember where 'Beat Box' ended and 'Close' began because at one point they were one track." The single reached number eight on the U.K. pop chart, helped by a brilliantly surreal video directed by Zbigniew Rybczynski, which also garnered steady play on MTV in the United States. The video's most striking image—a prepubescent punkette dismembering a piano with a chain saw—made for a witty visual emblem for the Art of Noise's updated version of *musique concrète's* slice-and-dice methods.

Foregrounding what Dudley calls the music's "disjointed wondrousness," the title also twists Yes's *Close to the Edge* to make an encrypted nod to the thunderous Alan White drum break underpinning both "Beat Box" and "Close." You can also hear "Close" as an homage to Kraftwerk and their *Autobahn*-era notion of the car as a musical instrument. The track begins with an engine starting, and a motor revving is developed into a melodic motif.

The success of the Art of Noise was another triumph for a seemingly unstoppable ZTT, but Trevor Horn wasn't exactly feeling relaxed. In fact, he was so nervous about Frankie being just a one-hit wonder that he spent three months fine-tuning the follow-up to "Relax," "Two Tribes," building and discarding versions of the single. Horn inflated Frankie's energetic but emaciated funk-metal ditty into an epic surge somewhere between Chic and Rush. Over an adrenalin-pumping bass pummel, swashbuckling guitars flash like the scimitars of jihad cavalry charging an infidel city. Featuring approximately nine lines of lyric, "Two Tribes" is even more jinglelike than "Relax." As antiwar polemic goes, the chorus, "When two tribes go to war/A point is all that you can score," is pretty trite, but Horn's supercharged production makes "Two Tribes" sound almost as momentous as its theme of nuclear doomsday.

It's the ancillary paraphernalia orchestrated by Morley that really made "Two Tribes" an event. In 1984, the cold war was in its final phase, before Gorbachev and glasnost. Soviet commander in chief Chernenko was a politburo hard-liner, while Reagan seemed scarily sincere when he described the Soviet Union as the Evil Empire. For the twelve-inch "Annihilation Mix" of "Two Tribes," impressionist Christopher Barrie impersonated the U.S. president uttering absurdities such as "Just think: War breaks out and nobody turns up." ZTT also hired actor Patrick Allen, the reassuring paternal voice of *Protect and Survive* (a record made by the British government to be played on the radio just before a nuclear attack), to repeat some of his chilling advice, such as "If your grandmother or any other member of the family should die whilst in the shelter, put them outside, but remember to tag them first for identification purposes."

Morley caked the record sleeves for "Two Tribes"—which, like "Relax," came in numerous mixes—in cold war facts and figures, including a sleeve note about alcoholism in the Soviet army, a table contrasting the superpowers' nuclear arsenals, and a chart displaying the number of deaths (in tens of millions) caused by the diverse aftereffects of a five-thousand-megaton war (ranging from toxic gases and nuclear winter to epidemics, famines, and psychiatric disorders). The video featured Frankie as a TV news crew on the sidelines of a no-holds-barred wrestling match between Reagan and Chernenko look-alikes, complete with knees in the groin and ear biting. The pièce de resistance, though, was Morley's T-shirt campaign, openly modeled on Katharine Hamnett's agitprop T-shirts that boasted slogans such as WORLD NUCLEAR BAN NOW and CHOOSE LIFE. Morley's FRANKIE SAY...series swept the nation with variations such as FRANKIE SAY BOMB IS A FOUR LETTER WORD and FRANKIE SAY ARM THE UNEMPLOYED, inevitably inspiring answer T-shirts such as WHO

GIVES A FUCK WHAT FRANKIE SAY.

Combining savage satire and sheer informative clout, “Two Tribes” ought to have been the ultimate protest record. Yet that intent was undercut by the whole feel of the record, which seems to exult in the prospect of apocalypse. “It’s not political,” Holly Johnson said. “It sounds *glorious*, I think.” The key to “Two Tribes” is the bursting euphoria with which Johnson sings the kiss-off line, “Are we living in a land where sex and horror are the new gods?” It’s Eros versus Thanatos again, the apocalyptic notion that anything goes in the decadent Last Days, that living like there’s no tomorrow is the logical response to a world in which nuclear annihilation constantly hangs over our heads. Like Prince’s “1999” with its “we could all die any day” call to party, “Two Tribes” sounds like celebration, which is why it’s nowhere near as effectively antiwar as UB40’s chilling “The Earth Dies Screaming” or Kate Bush’s “Breathing,” which actually took the listener inside the airless claustrophobia of the family fallout shelter as recommended by *Protect and Survive*.

“Two Tribes” entered the U.K. charts at number one on June 4 of 1984 and, stoked by innumerable remixes, stayed there for nine weeks. Amazingly, “Relax” surged back up the charts and for one week nestled at number two beneath “Two Tribes.” With the fourth (“Relax”) and eleventh (“Two Tribes”) best-selling U.K. singles of *all time* (back then, at least) under their belt, Frankie were now the biggest British pop group of the eighties, and a total vindication of ZTT’s media manipulation strategy. “In a stupid sense, the fantasy I had as an *NME* journalist about New Pop, it came true with me,” says Morley. “So there was a glorious narrative purity to it.”

When “The Power of Love” became their third number one in a row in December 1984, the conceptual arc of the Frankie singles was complete. Following sex and war, the big theme this time was religion, or redemption, or love as salvation. Something like that, anyway. “The Power of Love” also represented a kind of staged sellout, as if “narrative purity” demanded that Frankie relapse into mere showbiz, like all rebels eventually do. Holly crooned cabaret-style about “A force from above/Cleaning my soul,” a string section soared, Anne Dudley piled on the grand piano. All in all, it was a bit tacky. A blatant bid for the Christmas number one, “The Power of Love” was ousted from the top spot after just one week by Band Aid’s all-star African famine charity record “Do They Know It’s Christmas?”

Why not end it there as a conceptual coup, three number one hits that each addressed one of the grandest themes imaginable? “My plan, which was the height of naïveté and yet the height of sophistication, was to do ‘Power of Love,’ then sell Frankie for five million to someone like CBS,” says Morley. But by this point Frankiemania had

developed its own fatal logic. There had to be an album, and it had to be a double. *Welcome to the Pleasuredome* cost just under £400,000 and took Trevor Horn's cinemascope production to new peaks of opulence. "The world is my oyster," gloats Johnson on the side-long title track, just before mangling Coleridge with the cry "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan a pleasuredome EEEEEEE-RECT." Essentially "Relax" at a more regal tempo, "Welcome to the Pleasuredome" evokes a vague quest for glory, a wild life of thrill seeking and rapacious desire. After side two (the singles) and side three (mostly cover versions), *Pleasuredome* begins to flag seriously as it gets to the Frankie compositions. "Krisco Kisses" took its name from Crisco, the cooking fat widely used as a long-lasting sexual lubricant in pre-AIDS days, but the tune sounds as hamfisted as Iron Maiden trampling their way through the stage backdrops of *The Lexicon of Love*. By "Black Night White Light" and "The Only Star in Heaven," Johnson's limited lyrical range is revealed with lines such as "Live life like a diamond ring" and "The pleasure seekers are dying to meet ya/They need young blood." Worse, you can hear Horn's enthusiasm for the project audibly draining away.

Pleasuredome's packaging was sumptuous, of course, and strewn with great jokes, from the inner sleeve's ad for ZTT merchandise (Rutherford and Propaganda vocalist Claudia Brucken modeling The Jean Genet boxer shorts, The Sophisticated Virginia Woolf vest, The Andre Gide socks, and The Edith Sitwell bag for life's little luxuries) to the back cover's Picasso-style canvas depicting an orgy of satyrlike beasts (follow some of the long winding tongues and they end up at some other animal's puckered anus). But as a banquet stuffed with aphrodisiac fare, Frankie's double album is ultimately a turnoff. Rampant hedonism never sounded so tedious. Advance orders for *Pleasuredome* were staggering, in excess of one million in the U.K. alone, but as word spread, the copies didn't exactly fly out of the stores.

Pleasuredome almost totally eclipsed *Who's Afraid of the Art of Noise?* as both debut albums were unwisely released near-simultaneously. Propaganda, likewise, never really managed to get out from Frankie's shadow. ZTT spent a fortune on Propaganda's *A Secret Wish*, using the most costly state-of-the-art machinery and top-tier session musicians (including Yes guitarist Steve Howe). Yet the album's chart profile fell far short of expectations, as did the single "Duel"/"Jewel," which was two versions of one song, the first candy coated and catchy, the second harsh and metal-percussive. "Duel" sounded dazzling in the charts, but for all Morley's talk of "the private moment," Propaganda's music sounded too overlit to take into one's bedroom, or heart. ZTT, as always, were too schematic, too up-front about their designs on the listener. It wasn't enough just to refer to

dreams, obsession, visions, crime, or to slap a Ballard quote on a Propaganda single sleeve about the Baader-Meinhof Gang and madness as “the only freedom” in a world of bland, soul-crushing sanity. The pop song must be a spell, Marc Bolan said. The music itself had to enforce the magic. Here, *A Secret Wish* failed singularly. The sound was characterless. Holly Johnson had the sheer lung power to impose himself on Frankie’s records, to rival Horn with his own belting bombast, but there was no such presence in Propaganda, either vocally or in terms of the “band voice” that makes any truly great rock band recognizable within a few bars. *A Secret Wish* sounded like a ZTT record.

This is the downfall of all labels with a strong identity. In the end, no self-respecting band wants to be so totally subsumed by the brand. Eventually good new bands aren’t keen to sign, while those already on the roster start to chafe. Indeed, all of ZTT’s original big three—first the Art of Noise, then Propaganda, and finally Frankie—would eventually extricate themselves from their contracts, all of which were financially invidious. To this day, Horn still doesn’t quite get it. With surprisingly enduring bitterness, he complains that “Artists want record labels to be businessmen they can curse to give them an excuse when their own mediocrity shines through. The last thing they want is a creative record label. They want to keep the creative part all to themselves.” Morley is a little closer to grasping why the acts got frustrated. “It comes back to this weird thing—if you’re manipulated, it doesn’t matter if the people manipulating you are getting you to do fantastic stuff, you still feel manipulated. You want to do it yourself.”

ZTT’s fatal flaw was its adherence to the gospel according to Malcolm. Like McLaren with the Pistols, the label saw itself as the artist and the performers as raw material, mere pigment and canvas. Like McLaren with Bow Wow Wow, ZTT believed in an ill-conceived notion of revolution catalyzed from above. And as with McLaren, this was part of ZTT’s self-conception as renegade capitalists outwitting the pea-brained corporate dinosaurs, warriors pitting abstract values (imagination, verve, elegance) against the equally undefined negatives (mediocrity, sameness, dulled efficiency) that smothered the record industry.

In a curious echo of what happened to the Sex Pistols, Frankie’s seemingly unstoppable ascent received a reality check when it confronted the sheer size and impregnable imperturbability of America. Not only are U.S. listeners innately more hype resistant than the British, but the country’s fragmented regional markets and vast number of radio, TV, and print outlets actually make it much harder to manipulate the media. Unlike in Britain, records tend to build momentum more slowly, a process that weeds out stuff that lacks

“substance.” Initially, Frankie’s attempt to conquer America fared much better than the Pistols’ *Never Mind the Bollocks* stalled at 106 on *Billboard*, but “Relax” reached number ten. However, it took a toned-down repackaging of the single and a new video purged of S&M imagery to get the song onto the American charts. “Two Tribes” failed altogether, saddling the group with the dreaded one-hit-wonder tag as far as America was concerned, while the *Pleasedome* album peaked at number thirty-three.

In a bold gesture, Frankie’s first tour of America started in Washington, D.C., on Election Day 1984. But in their eagerness to prove themselves a potent live band (and not just Horn’s puppets), Frankie came across as bombastically rockist and, ultimately, rather conventional. Furthermore, during the tour, an already existing divide between the aesthete-diva Johnson and the boorishly hetero Lads widened further (with Rutherford caught in no-man’s-land), recalling the fissure between Lydon and the rest of the Pistols that became unbridgeable as the band traipsed across the United States in the first weeks of 1978.

“Trevor and Jill really wanted to sell Frankie in America,” Morley ruefully recalls. “I said, ‘You’ll never sell them there.’ In America, they thought Frankie were the Village People.” One of Morley’s favorite conceptual japes was *Pleasedome*’s cover of “Born to Run,” Frankie bringing out the latent homoerotic element of Springsteen’s appeal, along with that song’s phallic imagery. According to Morley, audiences at Frankie’s live shows in America responded to the cover version as sacrilege. By 1985, Springsteen was the figurehead of the New Authenticity, his “Born in the U.S.A.” imagery striking a power chord with the Anglophobic backlash against the flouncing gender-benders who dominated MTV.

American audiences tend to set a huge premium on live performance as the benchmark of a band’s authenticity and worth. Live performance is where contact between band and audience forges “community” in that old rock(ist) sense. In Britain, though, ZTT had prevented Frankie from playing live as long as possible, fearing they couldn’t come anywhere near to simulating the sound of the records. Instead, they created buzz through the singles, videos, and brilliantly engineered controversy. Simon Frith, one of ZTT’s more acute critics, argued that this made Frankie a band without genuine fans, a marketing-driven phenomenon with no real social energy behind it.

With respect to long-term reverberations, Frankie couldn’t compare to the Pistols, who despite their initial lack of impact in the United States, ended up steadily selling over a million albums there and inspired thousands of American bands. No legion of groups formed in Frankie’s image, not even in the U.K. Nor are the FRANKIE

SAY T-shirts prized as talismanic relics of an epochal moment, like punk memorabilia still is.

On one level, Frankie can be seen as punk's last blast. But on another deeper, structural level, Frankie were a taste of pop things to come—the return of the boy band. Perhaps that accounts for the curious hollowness, even at the very height of Frankiemania, of the phenomenon. In the end, both the consumers, left clutching the lavishly appointed bombast of *Pleasuredome*, and the band, bemused by the faint trickle of royalties coming through and humiliated by the general perception of them as ZTT's puppets, might have justifiably felt an ancient plaint rising in their throats. *Ever get the feeling you've been cheated?*

THE POSTPUNK YEARS felt like one long rush of endless surprise and inexhaustible creativity. You were constantly anticipating the next twist, the next leap forward. By 1985, though, it seemed like almost all of that energy had dissipated, as every trajectory from punk reached an impasse or petered out.

New Pop had plunged into decadence, something audible and visible in the overripe arrangements and bloated videos for Culture Club's "The War Song" and Duran Duran's "Wild Boys," both released at the end of '84. The all-star lineups of Band Aid's "Do They Know It's Christmas?," USA for Africa's "We Are the World," and Live Aid in the summer of '85 defined a new pop ruling class as sharply as 1971's Concert for Bangladesh had done for the rock royalty of its day. An unimpeachable cause, of course, but you couldn't help agreeing with Tony James of Sigue Sigue Sputnik when he quipped, "Live Aid was great for Ethiopians but terrible for pop music." That orgiastic spectacle of noblesse oblige fit all too neatly within the shared worldview of Thatcher and Reagan (both recently reelected), who promoted private philanthropy over government intervention.

But more than Live Aid, the true spirit of 1985 was embodied by Madonna. A one-woman American distillation of New Pop, she beat the Second British Invasion at its own game, repackaging ideas from black dance pop and gay culture to massive commercial effect. Madonna was a product of New York's club culture of the early eighties, the era of mutant disco and fashionable Anglophilia. She'd hung around the edges of Soft Cell's Manhattan milieu and taken fashion notes from the Slits. Ari Up once defined the Slits' anti-Babylon stance with the declaration "We ain't no material girls." Can it really be pure coincidence that Madonna used the exact same phrase to identify her ruthless brand of postfeminism in her 1985 smash "Material Girl"?

The really depressing thing about 1985, though, wasn't the mainstream tyranny of nouveau riche pop so much as the unimpressive state of the alternative scene. The collective sense of purpose that bound together the diverse initiatives of postpunk had seeped away. Everything seemed desperately disparate and therefore somehow diminished. John Peel caught the shape of the lack well when he admitted, "I don't even like the records I like." More than musical inspiration per se, what began to sink into a coma was the *discourse* around music. The rock press was demoralized; the fanzines, mourning punk, struggled to keep faith with its lost spirit in ways that were increasingly counterproductive. Writing in the music papers and zines alike suffered from relentless specificity, as it shied away from

taking a big-picture overview and instead monitored the scene's scattered output, the pernicious adequacy of which kept you hanging in there, just dimly aware that the motion and meaning might be going nowhere and meaning...less.

In retrospect, one can go back to the mideighties and find harbingers of future revolution. Rap was about to enter its most exciting phase yet, and there were early stirrings that would evolve into house and techno. But hindsight distorts. At the time, it felt grim. Scanning the independent charts in those days, you'd confront a smorgasbord of the stale and second-rate: past-its-prime Goth, rancid psychobilly, third-wave avant-funk, Fall copyists, trad-rock Americana, and a motley handful of moderately interesting bands. Likewise, the leading British independent labels of the era (Abstract, Illuminated, Kitchenware, 53rd and 3rd, Sweatbox, Ron Johnson) didn't have the legendary aura of Rough Trade and Factory, neither of which was doing especially well by the mideighties. America at least had SST, Twin Tone, Touch & Go, and Dischord to preside over the transition from hard-core punk to the more stylistically diffuse alternative rock emerging at the time.

But by and large, the heroic phase of the independent movement was past. By the mideighties, it had settled into steady but unspectacular growth. Independent culture no longer imagined it could supersede or even challenge the mainstream. The indie labels either functioned as a farm system for the majors (as soon as their groups attained a certain level of success, a big label poached them) or maintained microcult artists at a level just above subsistence. The average sales of an independent single in 1985 were half what they were in 1980. Rough Trade enjoyed a decent turnover (two million pounds annually), but they couldn't propel their artists to the next level, despite having adopted the competitive practices needed to navigate the *realpolitik* of eighties pop. After hit-hungry acts such as Scritti Politti and Aztec Camera left Rough Trade for majors, Geoff Travis found a "solution" of sorts. While still running Rough Trade, he founded Blanco Y Negro, a label that looked "indie" but actually operated in partnership with WEA.

The semantic shift from "independent" to "indie" contains its own story. "Independent" had once been a neutral term indicating a record's conditions of production and distribution. By 1985, "indie" referred to a musical genre, or gaggle of subgenres, with increasingly narrow parameters. The term "college rock" also gained currency in the United States because of the music's links to student tastes and the college radio circuit. "Indie" indicated a distinct sensibility, too, a sort of resentfully impotent opposition to mainstream pop.

In the mideighties, most chart pop was glossy, guitar free, black

influenced, soulfully strong voiced, dance oriented, high-tech, and ultramodern. Indie made a fetish of the opposite characteristics: scruffy guitars, white-only sources, weak or “pale” folk-based vocals, undanceable rhythms, lo-fi or Luddite production, and a retro (usually sixties) slant. Periodization is always a tricky thing when it comes to culture (messy at the best of times, always overspilling whatever lines you draw), but one of the primary reasons the main body of this book ends in 1984 is the shift in orientation from futurism to retro that took hold of independent culture around then. Postpunk’s essence was its vanguard mind-set of constantly looking *forward*. This impatience to reach the future had continued with that side of New Pop concerned with exploring the latest electronic technology while drawing inspiration from modern black dance music.

Postpunk and New Pop had both been impure, mixing up black and white, celebrating the eclectic, the hybrid, the polyglot. But by 1985, purism came back in favor. People craved “the authentic.” Some found it in raw roots music, ranging from acoustic-guitar-strumming protest singer Billy Bragg and the folk punk of the Pogues and the Men They Couldn’t Hang, to the populist Americana of the Blasters, Jason and the Scorchers, and Los Lobos. Others—the Jesus and Mary Chain, the Membranes—posited noise as both pure and purifying. They embraced the abrasive sounds of distortion and feedback as harsh, scouring forces that would purge the decadent luxury of chart pop and scuff its glossy synthetic surfaces.

At the start of this book, I mentioned that I hardly ever bought old records during the postpunk era because there was simply too much happening in the present. Starting in 1983, that changed, not just for me but for many other people who grew up during the punk and postpunk period. Suddenly the past started to seem alluring and intriguing, especially the sixties. It was the beginning of the now familiar syndrome whereby consumers use the abundance of the past to make it through the dry spells of the present. The reissue industry, puny by today’s standards, unleashed a torrent of sixties garage punk compilations and psychedelic anthologies.

There were particular qualities about sixties music—cosmic openheartedness, Dionysian abandon, a certain freedom in the playing—that made it attractive and refreshing to people coming out of a long period in which music had been uptight, hyperrational, and concept driven. After postpunk’s demystification and New Pop’s schematics, it felt liberating to listen to music rooted in mystical awe and blissed-out surrender. Postpunk had taken whole swathes of music off the menu for being too trippy, too excessive, too flamboyantly virtuosic. Discovering that you could listen to and actually enjoy a guitar solo by Jimi Hendrix was a revelation and a thrill, the frisson of

forbidden fruit.

It wasn't just that people started listening to the original sixties music again. All the good new bands seemed to be drawing from that era. Jangly guitars, folk rock harmonies, and psychedelic dreaminess were everywhere. Hüsker Dü covered the Byrds' "Eight Miles High" and the Beatles' "Ticket to Ride." And while not explicitly retro, the Smiths and R.E.M.—the two most important alt-rock bands of the day—did seem sixties-redolent because of their plangent guitar-chimes and folk-styled vocals. R.E.M. and the Smiths were eighties bands only in the sense of being *against* the eighties. The Smiths shunned synths in favor of guitars and for a while adamantly refused to do videos. Their whole stance was predicated on their British audience being a lost generation, exiles in their own land. Ditto R.E.M., who wistfully and abstractly conjured visions of new frontiers and fresh starts for America. All the great groups of this time, such as the Replacements and the Mekons (who brilliantly reinvented themselves as a folk-and-country band), dealt in similar feelings: bewilderment, impotence, resignation, a forlorn and dreamy yearning. This alt-rock sensibility finally reached the mainstream in the early nineties with Nirvana, its mixed emotions crystallized in Kurt Cobain's voice, a half snarl of defiance and half whimper of defeat.

Harking back to the sixties in order to make it through the eighties, indie bands invoked the very decade that Reagan and Thatcher were attempting to discredit. Of course, there was also an element of nostalgic fascination, and fashion. Revisiting the sixties was a solution to the *post-postpunk* quandary "where next?" Bands could draw on the decade as a pop archive of sound and imagery, as there were several "sixties" to be picked over for period details, increasing the range of recombinant possibilities: the Jesus and Mary Chain with their Beach Boys-meets-Velvets classicism, college radio's flocks of Byrds clones, Los Angeles's paisley underground of retro-psych bands such as the Dream Syndicate and Rain Parade, the Sisters of Mercy with their Stooges homages and 1969 fetish, and the Cult circa *Love* with their leather tassels, Steppenwolf riffs, and Jim Morrison vocals.

Of course, there had long been revivalist currents in rock music (look at seventies glam's echoes of fifties rock 'n' roll). But circa 1984, a shift occurred in which retro became dominant even within the vanguard of independent rock. The result was an aesthetic that could be called "record collection rock." Obviously, rock bands have always included record collectors in their ranks (the Rolling Stones, for instance, were connoisseurs of obscure blues sides). Postpunk was no different. Just look at the crucial role played by the esoteric musical taste of John Lydon, a nonmusician, in shaping the PiL aesthetic. But

from the sixties through postpunk, bands generally used their influences as inspirational fuel rather than as citational material. It was neither obvious to the ear nor necessary to know that PiL loved Can. What changed in the mideighties was that bands increasingly signposted their reference points and that spotting these allusions became an integral part of the listener's aesthetic response and enjoyment.

Essentially sampling without actually having a sampler, Jesus and Mary Chain pioneered "record collection rock." *Psychocandy*, the Scottish group's 1985 debut, deserves its classic status because of the thrilling way they juxtaposed their always faintly déjà vu melodies (equal parts Ronettes, Beach Boys, and Ramones) against a serenely shimmering wall of feedback, with the two elements of their sound—the noise and the pop—not really integrated at all. But when JAMC stripped away the torrential head rush to leave their songs exposed, what remained was pure blank homage. One song on their second album, *Darklands*, even stole the "woo woo" backing vocals from the Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil." I didn't know whether to smile or weep.

Creation, the JAMC's original label, was a prime purveyor of this kind of reproduction antique retro pop. Its roster included Nikki Sudden, the former front man of DIY pioneers Swell Maps, who by 1985 had reinvented himself as a Keith Richards-style rock 'n' roll gypsy troubadour. Creation's leading lights, though, were Primal Scream, fronted by rock scholar Bobby Gillespie (who also moonlighted as JAMC's original drummer). Talking eloquently of music being like a library, Gillespie articulated the Creation approach to rock history. Just as one could pluck books off the shelf from any era—Dickens followed by DeLillo followed by Dostoyevsky—similarly you could flit from Love to the Velvet Underground to Big Star. It sounded persuasive, except that this is how people *listen* to records, surely. Creating music ought to involve more than just making a patchwork out of the stylistic traits and lyrical tropes of your hallowed ancestors.

Primal Scream were icons for the scene known variously as cutie, shambling bands, or C86. The latter comes from an *NME* cassette—its title a deliberate echo of the epochal *C81*—that documented the resurgence of indie noise pop bands that began in 1985 and peaked the following year. Although the Jesus and Mary Chain were catalysts for this scene, and the sixties were the major reference point, the C86 groups—the Soup Dragons, the Pastels, June Brides, Shop Assistants—also drew on postpunk sources such as the Postcard bands, Swell Maps, Buzzcocks, Subway Sect, and the Fall. But it was postpunk with the most radical elements—the politics, the black/white fusion, the

studio experimentation—purged. For instance, the C86 shamblers left out Orange Juice's disco-funk influence but kept the sparkly guitar jangle and Edwyn Collins's "worldliness must keep apart from me" naïveté.

This cult of innocence, reflected in schoolkidlike clothes and hairstyles and chastely romantic lyrics, was the most intriguing element of the scene. Filtered through the American shambling band Beat Happening and its K record label, the cutie sensibility would enjoy something of a resurgence in the nineties in the form of Riot Grrrl, which drew heavily on C86's bands' androgyny-oriented sexual politics of cutesy but tough girls and male wimps. In 1986, however, the shambling movement ultimately foundered, despite strong major-label interest, because the ideal of "perfect pop" it espoused was cruelly out of step with what modern mainstream pop actually was. Yet this was kind of the *point* of the scene: its anachronistic defiance of the present.

In America, a parallel rediscovery of the sixties took place as bands worked their way forward through that decade, starting with garage punk, the Byrds, and early psychedelia. By 1986, the hipper bands had begun to move into the later sixties—the era of long hair, wah-wah pedals, heavy riffs, and acid rock. Sonic Youth recorded the Charles Manson-inspired "Death Valley 69" and got increasingly trippy-sounding. Butthole Surfers resembled a mobile "acid test" with their back-projected films, naked female dancer, and occasional onstage sex acts supplementing the group's effects-saturated music and weird vocal treatments. Buttholes' guitarist Paul Leary played full-blown, orgiastic guitar solos, as did J. Mascis of Dinosaur Jr. Jimi Hendrix, Black Sabbath, Neil Young, Blue Cheer, even the Grateful Dead, were new hip reference points. Drugs were compulsory.

The spirit of futurism that drove postpunk and New Pop seemed to have almost completely departed from the alternative scene in the mideighties. One could see traces of its modernist ambition here and there in the second-and third-wave industrial music aka Electronic Body Music (Front 242, Skinny Puppy, Ministry, and eventually Nine Inch Nails) or the more studio-savvy post-Goth music on labels such as 4AD (Cocteau Twins, Dead Can Dance). But "alternative" defines itself as pop's other, and this meant that the majority of independently released bands shunned synths, sequencers, and samplers, and recoiled from the dance floor. The Jesus and Mary Chain took this to the extreme with their music's utter lack of rhythmic thrust, the drumming listlessly marking time, the neurasthenic noise enfolding the listener's immobilized body in a rapt trance.

As for the original postpunk vanguardists and New Pop futurists who'd tried to unite music for the body and music for the head, they

almost uniformly had a rough time of it in the mideighties. Some, such as Billy Mackenzie and Marc Almond, drifted through dwindling solo careers. Others, such as the Human League, Heaven 17, and ABC, were ground down by the music industry way of doing things. Scritti's Green got lost in the studio. John Lydon went "rock" in a big way with 1986's *Album* (Zep riffs and Ginger Baker from Cream on drums!). The Banshees and the Bunnymen lost their spark. Gang of Four gave up. Malcolm McLaren and ZTT, meanwhile, should have quit at their peak, but naturally didn't.

ZTT's decline was bizarrely precipitous. After their world-shaking 1984, it seemed like the label developed the anti-Midas touch in 1985. Their new acts—Gallic chanteuse Anne Pigalle and Andrew Poppy, a Philip Glass/Michael Nyman-style systems music composer—barely dented the charts. Propaganda's *A Secret Wish* underperformed severely. The label's sole triumph that year was Grace Jones's hit single "Slave to the Rhythm," Trevor Horn's most sumptuous production to date. But the accompanying album, *Slave to the Rhythm: A Biography*—an adventurous exercise in deconstructing an icon and extending a single song through remixing—fell on deaf ears.

Things then got much worse for ZTT. Pissed off with the stingy royalty rates, J. J. Jeczalik, Gary Langan, and Anne Dudley decided *they* were the Art of Noise and parted company with Horn and Morley. By the end of 1985 the Art of Noise were signed to another label, where they scored a few more middling hits with a series of postmodern novelty singles. Frankie Goes to Hollywood started to act up, too. In yet another echo of the Sex Pistols, the band resisted ZTT's plan to make a *Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*-style Frankie movie, which was to have been a postapocalyptic fantasy scripted by Martin Amis with Nic Roeg lined up to direct. Instead, Frankie were determined to follow the conventional rock band path of consolidating their success with further recordings and tours. For their second album, the band insisted on playing all the music, which took twice as long. The sequel to *Pleasuredome* swallowed up an astronomical £760,000. Morley came up with the title *Liverpool* for the album, because that's where the group came from and, he knew, that's where they would soon return. Sure enough, the album flopped, and before long Holly Johnson fell out with both the band and ZTT, suing to be freed from his contract.

There were exceptions to the general rule of entropy. New Order cut a lustrous path through the eighties pop charts. Cabaret Voltaire kept making cool records. Mark Stewart's solo career was spasmodic but compelling. U2 had droves of detractors, but with the aurora borealis swirl of "With or Without You" and crystal drive of "Where

the Streets Have No Name” they took the puritan postpunk guitar sound—massive but minimal, majestic but free of pomp—and made it hugely popular. Depeche Mode, too, became most unlikely stadium stars in America, even as their music got ever more adventurous and emotionally subtle. One could also see postpunk’s legacy surfacing here and there in newer bands. The Red Hot Chili Peppers’ brand of funk metal owed a lot to Gang of Four’s funk punk (they got Andy Gill to produce their debut album), but with a frat boy rowdiness that went over better in America than Gang of Four. You could also hear Gill’s splintered guitar sound in groups like Fugazi and Big Black.

Turning its back on the idea of dance, indie rock (with a few notable exceptions) was determinedly funkless in the mid-to late eighties. In 1988, that side of postpunk began to reemerge from the gay, black Chicago house scene. The first acid house tunes seemed like the resurrection of avant-funk, half a decade after its demise. In the neurotic rhythms, ominous basslines, and desolate dub space of tracks like Phuture’s “Your Only Friend” and Sleezy D’s “I’ve Lost Control,” you could hear uncanny echoes of PiL, D.A.F., ESG, and 23 Skidoo. Even the imagery evoked by the track titles and stripped-down vocal chants—trance-dance as mind control—harked back to death disco.

First in the U.K. and Europe, then a few years later in America, this lost future of the early eighties came back with a bang in the form of the early nineties rave explosion. Thanks to the mind-opening effects of Ecstasy, the hard-core electronic side of postpunk and industrial found a mass audience. Perhaps this explains why in British and European rave culture you’d find such a surprising number of postpunk and synthpop veterans rubbing shoulders with Ecstasy-gobbling teenagers and born-again clubbers. Dormant careers were instantly revitalized by the new context created by the cultural synergy of house and Ecstasy. Richard H. Kirk, for instance, scored the dance floor success that always eluded Cabaret Voltaire as the bleep-techno outfit Sweet Exorcist. In the early eighties, Throbbing Gristle’s Genesis P-Orridge had formed a new band, Psychic TV, and had undertaken his own rediscovery of the sixties, dedicating himself to creating “hyperdelia” and releasing a tribute to Brian Jones called “Godstar.” In 1988, exhilarated by the emergence of a full-blown psychedelic dance culture, P-Orridge plunged into the acid house scene and put out an album called *Jack the Tab*. That same year, the Hacienda, once the site of Factory’s unsuccessful attempt to transplant the New York club vibe to Manchester, suddenly took off as Northern England’s rave mecca.

Rave music teemed with futuristic textures and strange noises that came straight out of D.A.F. and Cabaret Voltaire, but the context (crazed collective hedonism) and the emotion (euphoria with a mystic

tinge) were totally different. Acidhouse essentially fused postpunk futurism with sixties Dionysian frenzy. At the same time, rave culture represented an explosion of new independent labels, an epidemic of self-organizing activity. Teenagers made their own records on computers in their bedrooms, self-released them as white labels, and self-distributed them by personally selling them directly to specialist record stores. The hard-core rave underground was the ultimate expression of the do-it-yourself principle.

Postpunk continued to have a subliminal half-life in rave culture well into the midnineties. Darkside jungle tracks came out that sounded uncannily like This Heat, Byrne and Eno's *Bush of Ghosts*, or Japan. The Chemical Brothers based the agitated B-line of their MTV hit "Block Rockin' Beats" on the bass part in 23 Skidoo's classic "Coup." In the latter part of the decade, however, the clubbing industry became professionalized, with the once chaotically creative culture degenerating into a sort of Dionysianism on a leash, and gradually losing any of its lingering affinities with the postpunk spirit.

At the turn of the millennium, a new generation of young hipsters emerged who understandably thought club culture totally edgeless and lacking appeal. Rather than house's ease of release or trance's nullifying ecstasy, they craved tension music. As a result, the early eighties came back into vogue. Cold synthpop, punk funk, mutant disco, early industrial...for the first time in almost two decades, the angular, not-quite-fluid rhythms of postpunk dance music felt more exciting than the feel-good, go-with-the-flow fare offered by modern club culture. And it wasn't just the original music being rediscovered by fans and played by DJs, new bands started to form that were inspired by that era.

The resurgence of interest in postpunk was just a glimmer on the horizon when I first conceived this book early in 2001. In the subsequent four years, the revival has taken off, with a tidal wave of retro anthologies and reissues (bands such as Cabaret Voltaire, TG, 23 Skidoo, ESG, DNA, Scritti Politti) and clubs dedicated to playing vintage punk funk and electropop. Gang of Four and Mission of Burma have reunited to tour and record. There's been a highly successful movie about Factory Records and Joy Division, *24 Hour Party People*. Another, *Control*, based on the Ian Curtis memoir written by his widow and directed by Joy Division video maker Anton Corbijn, is in the pipeline. And a seemingly endless legion of new postpunk-influenced bands—the Rapture, LCD Soundsystem, Franz Ferdinand, Interpol, Liars,!!!, Wolf Eyes, Bloc Party, to name just a few—have swarmed over the music scene. Andy Gill's guitar sound has enjoyed yet another lease on life.

Many of these groups are great and it's both thrilling and

enjoyably disorienting to hear the sounds of my youth resurrected. There's a sense in which today's postpunk-inspired bands treat the era as unfinished business, a set of sonic potentials with plenty of room for further extension and exploration. They are also responding to the aura of urgency and missionary zeal that pervades the music of that period (without necessarily knowing that much about the original context those bands operated in). It's not clear, though, that the neopostpunk groups are fired up in the same way. Vocally these bands have the sound of militancy down, but lyrically they're rather more opaque. It's not as though there isn't a context that could function for them in the same way that the geopolitical turmoil and reactionary backlash of the late '70s and early '80s fueled postpunk. As I write, someone even worse than Reagan just got reelected. But perhaps overt resistance seems not so much futile as difficult to do convincingly, given that the nineties sensibility of irony and disengagement has yet to relinquish its grip on the culture. How to make politics in pop work without it being preaching to the converted, politically correct, or overearnest was one of postpunk's primary quandaries. Today, it seems that most bands deal with the problem by avoiding it altogether.

Yet the very thing that seems most worth resurrecting from postpunk is its commitment to change. This belief was expressed both in the conviction that music should keep moving forward and in the confidence that music can transform the world, even if only through altering one individual's perceptions or enlarging one's sense of possibility. Which brings me right back to where I started this book, the realization that it was punk and postpunk that originally made me believe music could matter so much. All this looking to music for answers, all this following of every twist and turn in the postpunk story, which in some ways continues to this day—was all that just a waste of energy that could and should have been spent on something “worthwhile”? Was the idea of change—*in* music and *through* music—just a diversion? I still don't know, but I'll always be grateful to this period for giving me such excessive expectations of music.

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RIP John Peel.

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